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# LANGUAGE PLAY, LITERACY, AND THE CHILD: PEDAGOGY IN A JAPANESE GARDEN

BY

DARLENE WITTE

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Edmonton, Alberta

FALL, 1993

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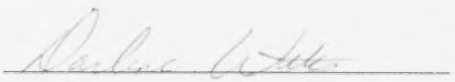

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FRONTISPIECE

The good and thus wholesome danger

is the nighness of the singing poet...

Heidegger

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The undersigned certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance a thesis entitled **LANGUAGE PLAY, LITERACY, AND THE CHILD: PEDAGOGY IN A JAPANESE GARDEN** submitted by **DARLENE LAUREL WITTE** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in ELEMENTARY EDUCATION.**

Lorene Everett-Turner

Daiyo Sawada

Moira F. Juliebo

Roberta McKay

Sonja Arntzen

Ken Jacknicke

Mary Doll M.F.J

**AUGUST 5, 1993**

# DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those

who have stood beside me,

listening to the river run...

To my daughter, Robin Eileen Johanna,
whose laughter makes life worth living.

To my sisters, Darcy and Vi.

To Anne and David Hill, who know
where the lightening rocks are.

To Daiyo Sawada who knows where
cherry blossoms grow.

To Lorene Everett-Turner who is as warm
and constant and good as the earth itself.

To Moira Juliebo who is
sunlight on the water.

To my mother, my Aunt Lenore,
and my Grandmother, for the patterns.

To my father, who could always see
the beauty in simple things.

And to Karen Reynolds, Leanna McBride,
Nophanet Dhamborvorn and Ian Sewell
who have been my friends.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the language and literacy of young children. Literacy is seen as emerging order within the flow of life, and as very sensual and personal. Adults are encouraged to be sensitive toward children, and to hear their jokes, word play, and so on, as necessary, disciplined work. "Pedagogy in a Japanese garden" points to literacy as emerging within human relationships, in which a child's native ability to participate in his or her own learning is gently nurtured.

The research undertaken here was inspired by the playful attitude of young children, some of whom had severe difficulty with early reading and writing, and who participated in intervention situations. Children's stories are shared, along with those of several adults who joined in the research through conversations and journal entries about their personal literacy experiences. This study finds that images of literacy blend with images of self. Early experiences in families and in classrooms have a long lasting influence on how individuals feel about themselves and their abilities as readers and writers.

In a fictional mode that draws upon many poetic voices including those of eastern and continental philosophies, this dissertation follows the pedagogical growth of a young teacher. Finding herself dissatisfied with the status quo, Mari reaches out for guidance. Through her encounters with a Japanese gardener, she affirms the nature of literacy as

physical, emotional, and spiritual. She acknowledges the language play of young children as originary literacy, something to be treated with respect and appreciation. She begins to understand that sensitivity toward children, as listening, is significant to their potential. The Japanese gardener teaches that the form of the garden is taken from views that can be seen in the distance, much like a child plays with/in the literacy of the surrounding world. A child's literacy is shaped by the river of language that enlivens his or her social landscape. Like a child laughing with enjoyment over a favourite story read again and again, the river articulates its own presence, as well as the face of mountain down which it tumbles, and the garden flourishes.

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Darlene Witte

TABLE OF CONTENTS


A. PROLOGUE

I. Out of silence ..... 1

B. PART ONE

I. In early hours, when the valley ..... 3
II. Even though it's only myself ..... 25
III. 'Tis to create, and in creating ..... 38
IV. I become Portion of that around me ..... 56

C. PART TWO

I. We shall not cease from exploration ..... 63

D. PART THREE

I. As he walked away, he discovered ..... 127
II. While with an eye made quiet ..... 132
III. Why is it that children never step ..... 134

E. PART FOUR

I. Before him stood the Tree, his Tree ..... 139
II. Behold the child among his newborn ..... 140
III. The jewel is in your bosom ..... 144
IV. I think I am a muffin man ..... 145
V. Is thy face like thy mother's ..... 151
VI. Beauty she would always have ..... 154
VII. The grip on his shoulder ..... 157
VIII. The plum tree is plum to its roots ..... 160
IX. Every phrase and every sentence ..... 162
X. He sees no stars who does not see ..... 176
XI. We can grant that every individual ..... 184

F. PART FIVE

I. Jenny told her one day what ..... 189
II. Come forth, and bring with you ..... 207

G. EPILOGUE

I. Look Sariputra, "Emptiness is form" ..... 208
II. Be round, thoroughly round ..... 214
III. The wind brings me enough ..... 218
IV. By its original meaning 'poetry' ..... 220
V. Clear and distinct, but not loud ..... 222
VI. There breathes a living fragrance ..... 228
VII. The whole difference between ..... 232

H. TREES IN THE FOREST ..... 237

# PROLOGUE

## I

Out of silence
a sound...
(Longfellow, 1858)

As you read this dissertation, you are invited into my memories as I speak through the character Mari, attempting to help a young woman named Chandre, who is about to begin teaching. This dissertation presents an unfolding of my pedagogy, beginning with my first day in a classroom. I have explored the nature of literacy through a fictional synthesis of my own experiences, conversations with many other teachers, and descriptions of the emerging literacy of some of the young children with whom I worked during many years of learning and growing.

I find literacy to be essentially aesthetic and sensual, and as I have struggled to express this, my own literacy walks naked through the world (Yeats, 1928). Reading and writing, or literacy, I see as continually vulnerable, and as personal expression within complex life relationships.

The essence of literacy, I believe, is social, just as the essence of language is social, and just as the essence of the human being is a social, spiritual quality. What could this mean for pedagogy? Children learn as they participate in relationships. If our children are to express their abilities, this must be recognized. If a child is to learn to read and write, perhaps a human

relationship, rather than the memorization of sets of skills, is the place to begin. Our literacy is our relationships expressed within language, literature and human love, not only the practise of subskills which may permit one to perform basic literate functions.

In order to present this view of literacy in a way that seems true to itself, this dissertation has been undertaken as a literary work. Accordingly, theoretical and methodological considerations are not addressed until the epilogue.

# PART ONE

## I

In early hours, when
the valley and the hills and the garden
divest themselves of veils of mist,
and the cups of flowers fill themselves
with many colours, so longingly awaited;
when the air, carrying clouds, vies
with the bright daylight, and an east wind,
dispersing them, prepares a path
of azure for the sun... (Goethe, 1964, p. 331)

I was sitting in my classroom, boxes piled near the door, waiting for my ride to come. I had been at this school for five years, and was ready to move on. As I waited, a young woman came into the room, a scent of fragrant spring wind blowing in through the door with her. She smiled at me, and introduced herself. Her name, she said, was Chandre, and she told me that come September, this would be her classroom. She confided that she had just finished university, and was quite terrified. "How do you teach? How do you do it?" she asked, her brown eyes wide and her cheeks pale. "I don't know where to begin", she murmured, "Not really." I stared at her for a few seconds. Her question was so innocent. So naive. Surely learning to teach was one of the most complex situations anyone could ever face.

Taken aback, I said, "I can hardly answer you.

How did I do it? I..."

Realizing my confusion, she said, "Have you got a few minutes before you go? Could you just tell me about it? About how you began? Like, how was the first day for you?"

I rose to the question in her eyes, and began...

It was a Thursday morning, and the first of May. My first job, and the first day. I awoke to find that there had been a late spring snowfall, surely the last of the season. When I stepped outside the teacherage door, the first thing I saw was a daffodil, yellow cupped and green stemmed, swaying under a catch of pure white snow. First morning, last snowfall. I had moved into the tiny house the day before, and for the first time in my life I was a teacher. Yesterday I was still a student, someone whose fate seemed to be ever held in the hands of others, those who set assignments, and who graded them, and in doing so graded me. They never quite seemed to hear me. But today I was different. I was a brand new, baby teacher. Who would I become in this place? I felt like singing and crying at the same time. In this moment-of-me-and-the-golden-bell-hung-all-over-with-frozen-crystals-beside-the-teacherage-path, I felt warm. Laughter bubbled up into my throat, where it suddenly shattered and froze. I was afraid. And I was not afraid. I looked out across the valley floor and

found that the shards of my laughter had melted into a song. The song fluttered inside my chest, and I wanted to pour it out of me and across the valley floor. A song of firsts and lasts, of beginnings and endings, a song of the wonder, the sorrow, and the struggle of my soul winding its way between heaven and earth. A song of naming and of growing. A song of my heart's joy. A song of dancing. A song of becoming, that would set alight the sparkle in the eyes of the children whom I would soon meet behind the banks of sunsilvered windows in the silent, flat roofed school at the top of the hill. I hoped that I would be able to hear them as neither they nor I had ever been heard before, and that our joy, our dancing, and our singing, would fill the valley.

I walked across the road that led through the valley from the teacherage to the school, a long narrow building that ran along the crest of the hill. Behind the school the sky swirled blue and white, softening the straight, serious lines of the building. As I approached, the brilliant snow crystals bloomed under the intense May sun.

Although it was not yet nine o'clock in the morning, the sun felt gently warm on my skin. I stopped for a moment, and viewed the tall, rangy spruce trees that edged both the sky and school in a green-black fringe. As I drew nearer, I could see crab apple trees showing the bright green tips of new leaves, and tulips blooming in luscious

red and yellow layers. These filled a long, wide flower bed that ran along under the tall windows of the school.

By the time I had reached the school door, the snow that had caught on the branches and tulip petals had begun to turn into sodden lumps with dripping diamond-clear edges. Trickling, dripping sounds and the sweet odor of melting snow had begun to mingle with the raw smell of oozing earth. Along the rim of the sky on the distant horizon, a line of blue-white mountains caught the sunshine coming in from the east in a salmon pink and grey-purple meld. Between the school and that horizon there were long rolling hills, one layer blending into the next in a flow broken only by dark waving lines of trees.

All lands hold promise. What possibilities would unfold here, among these rolling hills and this eloquent, open sky? Before me, one hill folded into the next, the snow outside sank into the earth on which it lay, and the school suddenly seemed to open and enfold me, song and singing, fear, and all.

The day before I had been sitting in a classroom at a city university fifty miles away, writing a psychology exam. Today, I would meet thirty four children in a grade three-four classroom. We would have eight weeks together before the beginning of summer holidays.

I opened the door, climbed the stairs and went inside. I was met by a grey faced, thick set man in a red and white,

leather and melton cloth baseball jacket. His hair was cut so short that you could see his scalp. He opened his mouth in a smile that wasn't quite a smile, a semi-pleasantry that didn't stretch to his eyes. "You must be Mari. The classroom is just down the hall. We're ready for you." I nodded to him, and followed. "The superintendent mentioned that the teacher who has been in this classroom had to leave for health reasons?", I probed. He nodded. "Yes. The class is a little unsettled right now. Think you can handle it?" I grinned, and remembered the daffodil full of snow. There seemed to be no other way to answer that question. If I had said no, I didn't think he would have been amused. And to have said yes didn't seem to be near enough to the truth.

As we started down the hall way, I glanced up. There was a glass box fastened high on the wall. Inside was a doll, a male figure dressed in white and yellow robes, looking soberly at me. His hair was tied neatly behind his head. He was a gardener. Behind him was a paper screen painted with mountains and trees. He was seated beside a pool of water, and in one hand he held what appeared to be a long, wooden dipper. It seemed as though he was in the act of offering me a drink of water. His other hand was posed in a gesture of greeting. He seemed to want to ask me a question, his bright eyes and serious mouth nevertheless accepting of the informality of my long curly brown hair, my

black pants and red sweater. There was such a sense of sobriety in his stance. But something more. Kindness? Concern? I sensed that he knew about the daffodil full of snow, and my wanting to sing and cry at the same time. He undoubtedly knew that I was both afraid and not afraid. Of that, he seemed to approve. A brass plate fastened to the case was inscribed with a few details about the doll. "A Japanese doll, gardener, 17th century AD. Was believed to possess a very powerful Kami, or Shinto spirit." Mr. Foster opened the classroom door, revealing rows of children seated in desks. While I looked at the children and smiled, I could still feel the eyes of the doll staring at my back. Although gentle, his demeanor was full of challenge, and his eyes were keen.

Was it the doll or was it the staring eyes of the children that made me uncomfortable? Or was it the feeling of being between the two? For several seconds Mr. Foster and I stood in the doorway. The children sat very still, waiting.

"So that's how many thirty-four eight and nine year olds is," I thought to myself, and I stood there. I smiled. As I did, advice I remembered having heard from experienced teachers I knew echoed. "Don't smile for at least the first month." Too late. Already I had done something wrong. My smile stiffened, and I wondered what to do next. Should I go to the teacher's desk and sit down in the stained, brown

windsor chair standing behind it? Should I stand at the front of the classroom? Did my hands and feet look as awkward as they felt to me? Did I appear vulnerable, out of place, and shy?

Mr. Foster introduced me to the class, his face serious, and his voice toneless, like a wire too slack to hum. Then he turned and strode out, shutting the door behind him. I stared at the closed door for a second, and then turned to face the children. How was I going to do this? How did a teacher teach? What made a "good teacher"? How did one become a "bad" teacher? Was it something that just happened? Was it possible to choose which one would become? Was teaching the same thing as learning? Would it be alright to smile?

How did one not smile for a whole month? Absurd thoughts ran through my mind as I stood there. Like, would a bell ring in the back of my mind the moment the month-without-smiling was up? On cue, would a smile burst onto my face? Would the children sense the sudden warmth, and turn and smile back with the radiance of the sun sparkling on water? Would they reach out their hands to me, and I to them in a sudden release of ecstatic human bonding? Or would they merely stare at me in uncertain silence, not knowing that the month was up, that a bell inside my head had rung, and that the period of "Letting them know who was boss," had suddenly come to and end? Suddenly, I knew that

both the remembered advice and the image were ridiculous. The children and I didn't know how to be together. We were as daffodil and snow. Could we learn to sway together in spring gold light? Could our voices melt into each other and become one, like mingled rain and earth, like snowflakes sloughing into a river, like pink-rose morning light blending into the grey-blue smudge of distant mountains? Would the snow inside the petal-cup melt, and flood down the stem of the flower to nourish and strengthen the roots?

The moment of silence during which the children and I regarded each other stretched out like a tightening rubber band. Tension circled around me, and drew me forward to the front and centre of the classroom to directly face the children as they stared at me from their straight rows of desks, with their round faces, and frozen hands and legs.

How did one begin? And how did one carry on? Everyone I knew had had advice for me, but other than the warnings about not smiling, I could remember none of it. I opened my mouth. I heard myself speak. My voice seemed to come from somewhere outside my body. My heart was racing, beating so loudly that I could not hear my own words. The children watched me. They began to move as I spoke, and I assumed I had asked them to do something. Their faces were sober, and their eyes hidden.

When the day was over, I was unable to remember much of what had happened. Not only could I remember little of that

first day, I found that I remembered precious little of the next, or of any of the days which followed. I must have arrived at the school every day, I must have done what was expected of me, because as each day ended I knew that I would return the next morning.

Of that first day, I can remember only a tremendous sense of struggle, and that I felt as though I were trapped inside fog. For the whole of those first eight weeks, even the sound of my own voice seemed muffled and vague. From one moment to the next, I didn't seem to know what to do or say, and through all my uncertainty, the children waited. By the end of each day I felt overwhelmed, weary. I craved silence, sleep, and stillness. But rest was denied me, as the nights were filled with replayed snatches of the day from which I sought to retreat. My dreams were filled with faces, with voices, with chatter, and with the strain of my voice trying to speak loudly enough so I could hear it. I seemed to be perpetually separated from the children I so badly wanted to reach, to touch, to talk to, and to laugh with. Both night and day, I walked in slow motion through the classroom sensing the presence of the children, and yet I couldn't seem to quite hear them. They couldn't quite seem to hear me. We remained apart, wraiths in movement, shadows dancing past shadows, not alone and yet alone.

Classes began daily with my voice leading out with, "Good morning boys and girls." I wanted to sound gentle but

firm, and warm, and strong. The children responded to me voices in unison, eyes forward, feet still, hands folded in front or hanging slack against their sides. It seemed to be what they were used to. Some of them mumbled, looking shyly at a spot a short distance in front of their faces, a nowhere spot. Some of them looked at the floor, or at the corner of the room, this formality of greeting stiffening their mouths as they spoke. A few stood silent. And from those ordered, antiphonal moments, disorder gradually ruled. But no one but me seemed to sense that there was anything amiss, or that disorder reigned. On the few occasions that Mr. Foster visited the room he saw the children working quietly at their desks, heads bent, feet still. He was once moved to comment, respectfully, that I conducted the quietest art class he had ever seen.

Did the children know? That even as I demanded it of them, this silence of theirs was flawed?

One morning, soon after the daily morning murmur, as the readers and workbooks were distributed, I stood at the front of the room with a list of questions taken from the workbook in my hand. I asked Mindy if she knew the answer to the first. As I waited, titters spread across the room in widening ripples. Mindy sat still. She lowered her head, and grinned at her exercise book. The ripple of laughter bothered me, but not Mindy's lack of response. I had seen this before in this class. Whenever a child didn't

have a correct answer ready for a question the other children would break into ridicule. Moreover, the whole class seemed to expect me to either initiate or join them in this. A confrontation over this was inevitable, but until the moment that I opened my mouth to protect Mindy I wasn't aware that it was imminent. Without warning I felt my voice rise, and heard myself say that this was unacceptable and had to stop.

It did. Giggling when someone didn't know an answer stopped. But a tension of another kind remained. It was as though the teasing and ridicule had lived so long with them that the children felt its absence as a loss. They didn't know how to respond instead. They knew they suddenly were not supposed to tease, but they didn't know how to not tease. I had hoped that they would begin to support each other with smiles and encouraging comments. I had hoped that they would at least be accepting of each other. But that didn't happen. Instead, they grinned sideways at each other in apologetic embarrassment. Wide eyed and pale, they stared at me through the uncertainty I had created. Mindy flushed, and bit her lip. She looked at me, soberly. What were they to say or do when one of them didn't know?

There seemed to be a lot of this "not knowing." Most of every morning was spent doing what the time table indicated as "Language Arts." I soon learned that this had very little to do with real language, and less to do with

the transcendent, existential possibilities of literacy, which is what I had supposed the "arts" part of the title referred to. There were two sets of readers, each with two workbooks per child, and two teacher's guides for me to follow. My private name for these was "The Behemoth." After school each day I planned lessons for the next day, referring to the teacher's guides. The readers had stories that were supposed to be suitable for the reading levels of the children. These guide books indicated that once or twice a week the children were to be 'introduced' to 'new vocabulary', and a 'new' story. The words and the stories were listed. The teacher's guide had suggestions for work to be copied off the board, and for making work sheets. These, like the workbooks, focused on grammar, spelling, comprehension, and the like. "What kind of pickle was in the jar?" "Why was Aunt Mary upset?" "How did the dogs find their way home?" "Find all the words on page 134 that end with 'er. List them." "What happens if you add 'ing to 'shop'? To listen? To fall? To stop? To ski?" From all of this, one supposed, the children would learn to read and write, and spell. Supposedly, literacy would result.

Unfortunately, most of the class could read less than half the words on any page of the reader, workbook, or work sheet. They did not know how to work together to help each other, and there were too many of them having too much difficulty for me to help them enough to make any

difference. The guide book and the workbooks indicated that the children should be making lists of word parts, filling in blanks, connecting dots, answering questions with complete sentences, putting commas into sentences and apostrophes into words, using question marks, and so on. A handful of the children did these exercises quickly and well, making me wonder if they had really learned anything by doing them. They seemed to already know the concept the exercise was having them practise. The others, the ones who didn't seem to know, didn't learn the concepts from doing the exercises because they couldn't read or write well enough to really understand what they were supposed to be doing at all. They would stare at the print briefly, and then begin a search for a different pencil, or a particularly elusive bit of eraser. Really, most of this "work" seemed pointless for nearly everyone, nevertheless it was done, demanded by the behemoth, the curriculum, and most of all by the fact that since time immemorial, it had been done before. Tradition. The children themselves, the tiles on the floor, the blinds on the windows, all seemed to be saturated with the expectation that "the five concept areas" indicated in the guide book would consume the energies of the children for at least two and a half hours per day. These concept areas included comprehension, vocabulary, spelling, and other grammatical work like sentence or paragraph writing. How could these expectations, which

seemed to be so logical, so reasonable, and so minimal, be other than they seemed? Surely it was me who was wrong, who was inadequate. If I were a better teacher, more organized and widely experienced, the behemoth would meet the children's needs. Wouldn't it? They would read and write. Wouldn't they? For each story in the reader, the five concept areas were located in different sections of the teacher's guide. Because there were two reading groups, I had to look in ten different places for the information I supposedly needed to teach each lesson, endlessly turning pages in the massive teacher's guides and copying items ponderously, first onto my plan book and then onto the chalk board or a work sheet until I would find myself falling asleep from boredom, and walk back to the teacherage in the gathering gloom of evening.

My discomfort with this orderly veneer grew gradually. Order was the obvious intent of the way the workbooks, the readers, and the guide book exercises were organized. Knowledge was reduced to information, which was to be delivered through these orderly bits which simplified complex written language. The assumption seemed to be that this pre-ordering would make sense to the children. The breaking down and re-ordering obviously made sense to the adults who had done the ordering, and who had therefore conceived of and produced the materials. I knew that the behemoth had been provided with the best of motivations, and

presented itself logically. My anger towards the indifferent, serious futility, of the behemoth was guilt ridden. Surely the fact that these methods were ineffective with the children themselves and virtually useless for all of them was my fault? Everyone else seemed to assume that the way this information was organized was of value. Everyone else seemed to agree that this pre-organization which the children then read through and repeated, would predispose the children to eventually being able to repeat the tearing down of language to the ultimate satisfaction of... Whom? What? What was the real importance of the revelation of underlying grammatical patterns and the essential organization, grouping the 'ight' words all together, drawing lines from one 'ent' word to another, with verbs dutifully busy, and nouns appropriately officious. Was this literacy of empty blanks also one of cold hearts and empty minds?

It should be easy for the children. Some one had already sorted the information. That should make it so much easier than if they were left on their own to find the patterns in meaning and spelling, on their own. Shouldn't it? It was possible, wasn't it, for one mind to do this kind of basic sorting for another, and expect it to be meaningful? I knew that repetition and effort were needed. From my own experience I knew that repetition and effort helped one to organize what one knew. But who was doing the

perceiving and the sorting? Was that the question? Did my discomfort lie in the assumption that if the finding of the pattern was done before the child ever opened the workbook, that it was the same thing as the child doing by him or herself, supported all around by others finding and doing and recreating along with and beside you, busy, and everything being all at once, on the go, and in the moment?

To me it seemed that the intentions expressed in the guide books, and literacy as I knew it, were spinning in opposite directions, and although the children were sitting in their desks sifting the bits, I was quite certain that, for the most part, they were not really learning or thinking, or even paying much attention at all.

It wasn't long before I could predict how each of the children could be expected to react. Most were indifferent, surreptitiously planning their time between recesses so that they did as little actual reading or writing as possible. Meanwhile, all heads were bent over books, and pencils seemed to be in movement. On the surface, all appeared to be as expected. There were a few little girls who seemed to get a great deal of satisfaction from doing everything assigned. I had the feeling that they were doing what they were told so quickly and well for the enjoyment of then being told what to do next. For them, achievement seemed to be in doing what was expected. But wasn't the point of doing all the exercises that they would be able to work on

their own? That was the impression I had been given in more than one class at university. So when would these little girls begin to think and do for themselves? When I suggested that they try, they seemed to be disappointed and more than a little confused. Wasn't it my job, as the teacher, to know what they were supposed to do and tell them? And then check to see that they had done it? Weren't those the unspoken rules?

Regardless of my misgivings, and my personal sense of disorder, I must have given the appearance of doing what teachers are supposed to do, because on the last day of school in June Mr. Foster called me into his office and, his eyes slightly warm and his mouth attempting to smile, handed me a document entitled " Teaching Contract: Temporary." The temporary contract was the plum coveted by all beginning teachers, the open door to carry on in a classroom, the last step before the permanent teaching license, and hopefully a step toward the Permanent Contract. It meant that I had succeeded. The Temporary Contract was neatly typed on cream coloured onion skin, with pink and green copies attached. He offered me his pen. I wrote my name on a line near the bottom.

I stared briefly at my signature, aware that it ensured that I would continue to engage in this same incomprehensible effort for the next two years. Commitment in triplicate. I should have been honoured. I should have

been happy. Shouldn't I have felt something beyond dismay. Satisfaction, perhaps? Wasn't this a great moment in my life? As I turned to leave his office, Mr. Foster informed me that next fall my teaching assignment would be grade one. There would be twenty one children, and he hoped I would have a very nice summer.

I walked back down the hall way to the classroom. It was empty. Oddly empty. Except for rows of desks, shelves of neatly stacked books, and litter on the floor. Only moments before, the children had flittered past me. I had stood at the window, watching them run to their busses, listened to them shouting, "I passed. I passed. Did you pass? Did you?" Report cards, gym shoes, and worn out bits of erasers, pencils and crayons had been jumbled into paper bags or lunch kits along with half-eaten peanut butter sandwiches. The children had run out to catch buses home, their eyes shining and their feet dancing with excitement. Some had stopped long enough to hug me good-bye, but most had rushed past, too delighted with the thought of freedom to wait for ceremony.

I stood alone in the classroom, silence welling into the space the children had left.

Two more years? No. No way. Not even two more days. Not like this, I thought. There must be something more. All my life I had been fascinated with the wonder of reading and writing. But during my two months in this classroom

there had been little that had seemed meaningful. What I had done in this classroom was about reading and writing, but from a distance, like hearing about someone's trip to Spain, but never going there yourself.

Whatever it was about language that so fascinated me, that had made my ability to read and write the joy of my being, I knew I had not brought to life for these children. I had failed them. Hadn't I? Or had I? Mr. Foster didn't seem to think so. He was delighted. According to him, "Curriculum requirements had been fulfilled." I had, "Maintained a well-ordered classroom." There had been, "No complaints from parents or other teachers about the behaviour or progress of the children." I had succeeded. At what?

Whatever Mr. Foster considered to be my success, I knew that I had fallen short. I was unhappy, and only a few days into my teaching career, and I had come to dread each morning. Once, during the time slot identified on the Time Table as Language Arts, I had set aside the prescribed reading series, and had read aloud to the children from the Arbuthnot collection of children's literature. I did this with a sense of trepidation. Mr. Foster had declared that I shouldn't "Just read out loud" to the children. If I read to them, he warned, I should be prepared to justify the time spent according to specific curricular objectives. Reading for enjoyment was not, in his opinion, meeting curriculum

objectives, and should be kept to a minimum. I realized that, in fact, Mr. Foster would consider reading aloud to the children dangerously near to wasting time. Nevertheless, the day came when I had found myself unable to force myself into the regular routine. I had picked up the large dark blue book from the shelf where I had placed it when I had first moved into the classroom. I opened it, standing in front of the children, wondering if any of them felt as I did, a sense of ceremony in holding and opening such a book as this. I had no way of knowing. Nevertheless, I read. Starting with, "Once upon a time when pigs spoke rhyme, and monkeys chewed tobacco...", I read until my throat was raw. As I read, and for a few moments after I was finished, I sensed the childrens' delight. There was a fresh energy in them. I could see it in their eyes and in their faces. Their skin shone.

When I was young, this anthology had been my favourite book. Not to read myself, but to listen to. My mom had read to me from it every day, and often when my friends came over to play we would beg her to read to us. Over the years hearing those stories, like so many other books, had come to be like meeting old friends.

Thus, it was with this sense of anticipation that I had walked into the class the next morning. I had wondered if the stories would be like old friends to these children. But no one had suggested that I read them again, or that

they try reading them themselves. I picked up the book, but was greeted with groans, with sighs, and with, "We did that yesterday. It's boring." Then I had invited the children to write stories of their own. They had fiddled with bits of words, and fragments of sentences, leaving most of the paper untouched. Bare. A few had written a line or two, and a few more had doodled in the margins of the paper. But for the most part, they had not known how to accept the challenge of forging a world of their own with words. Rather than write, most had preferred to giggle with the children beside them, or to saw erasers into bits with the metal tips of pencils or with scissor blades. They had preferred to crumple balls of paper and cram them into the recesses of their desks. Some opened books and stared at the words, but few of them read. Many of them couldn't really read. They could stumble along, sounding out words, but getting little or no sense of message. Most didn't try. Their response to my invitation to explore the Arbuthnot collection with me was much the same as their response to the everyday fare to which they had been accustomed. They fidgeted and fiddled, and waited for the minutes to pass, their minds once again locked behind an opaque screen. Their bodies cried out for the bell to ring, and for the freedom to spring up from their desks and run down the hall ways, to burst into the fresh air and run until their throats sobbed with weariness. I knew that they longed to

be playing, to be outside, blowing bits of grass into the sky, to be hunting for the first dandelions of the season, to be piling up four or five deep on the slide and coming down in a tumble of arms and legs, to be playing baseball, to be chasing mice in the field below the school, and capturing them in paper bags or tin cans, where they would save them until the next "break." For most of these children the world of literacy and literature, seemed to be impenetrable. Unyielding and distasteful. Yesterday there had been a glow of interest as I had read aloud to them. But today the glow was gone. How could I bring it back? Better still, how could I make a place in the classroom for children to learn how to do it for themselves? Perhaps this excitement wasn't something I could give them. I could only point the way.

As I stood there wondering how to help these children begin to search for the possibility of finding that warm, vital, growing place inside themselves, I had seen Larry look at Victor. The look was answered with a light punch on the elbow, which they tried to keep hidden from my view. I knew that later on the playground, that light punch on the elbow would be returned as a heavier punch to the chest.

With Larry and Victor glaring at each other and a snicker of unrest flickering through the eyes of several more children, I accepted defeat. The potential language play and fun of Master of all Masters was, for the moment at

least, out of the question. I laid the anthology on the corner of the desk and told the children to take their readers out of their desks. I assigned work as I had been doing in the past. That day, and the next, and the next wore on with my heart and mind dulled. How could I teach differently when even the children wanted me do let them do only the familiar? How could I show them that it could be different? They seemed to be so ready to accept the mundane. As before, some did the assigned work. For most, the lists of sentences with holes in the them, and the stories about dogs and boys who ran races in imaginary summer heat remained untouched. But it wasn't enough, not for any of us.

## II

Even though it's only myself,
it's scary reflected in the water.
(Shigamatsu, 1988, line 752)

For who will be taught if he be not moved
with the desire to be taught.
(Sydney, 1592, line 25)

One morning, Phil, a boy who Mr. Foster had mentioned was "Having some trouble at home", for no reason that was obvious to me, had picked up a wooden block the size of a pound of butter, and with all his strength had thrown it across the room. The other children had stared at him, and

at me. Shocked. I sent the rest of the class outside for a few minutes of early recess, and I had been sitting with him in the classroom. He didn't want to talk about what he had done or why. Yes, he knew that it was dangerous, and yes he cared. But that was all he would say. We stared at each other. Tense skin circled his eyes. His fingers were clenched. Tears wavered in his voice. He turned away from me. We could hear the children in the playground outside shouting, a roar of sound beyond the walls. He reached out his hand and picked up a book that was lying on his desk. He handed it to me. Would I please read to him? A little surprised, I opened the book and began. He inched close. As I read, he began to relax. In six weeks it was the first time I had noticed him having any interest in the possibility of going beyond, of him pushing himself beyond his own boundaries. The story was about a pig and a dog who made friends with an old car, and together they set off on a journey to find a home of their own. As my voice moved through the words, I could sense that a shared, safe place, was being created between us. The stiffness drained out of Phil's body. He leaned into my lap. I read, realizing that the words were stroking his heart, expanding his mind, and soothing his body. It struck me that if he could feel well and whole for just a few moments with me and within the story, perhaps he would begin to create his own life in a new way. Would he begin to find his own strength? Would he

have a chance to let this calmness grow?

My voice wound on, spinning a web world of sound and words, and the pig and the dog and the old rattlety bang car found the home they were searching for. They were happy together, friends forever, loyal and true. I closed the book and handed it back to him. He asked if he could take it home, and I agreed. Then the bell rang and we heard feet and voices in the hall way. He looked at me. "Sorry about the block," he said. "I could've hurt somebody." He laid his head on his desk and waited for the other children to come in.

After Phil and the others had left that day, I had found myself even more exhausted and bewildered than usual, and deeply disappointed. Indeed, someone could have been badly hurt in Phil's outbreak of temper. But at the same time, my mind had stirred with a memory that had begun to flicker behind my thoughts as I had felt Phil following the sound of my voice into his moment of calm, and becoming somehow more than he was. As a young child, I had experienced this contentment, this wellness of being many times, through literature, and leaning into the warmth of my grandmother. My childhood memories of language and literacy were of a bubbling joy mixed with memories of singing, the rhyming sounds of words, and the good tastes of Grandmother's kitchen. One of my earliest memories was of trying to reach the sugar bowl at the back of the kitchen

table while Grandma stirred something in a pot on the stove. My small body had been awash in a sensory bath of savory smells and pleasant sounds. The sounds came from the old wood cook stove, and from Grandma's voice and feet. She was prancing across the kitchen floor waving a spoon, and her eyes were dancing. She was reciting poetry. A river of sounds tumbled out of her body and into mine. It made me think of a story I had heard once about a good princess who, every time she spoke, had diamonds and pearls pouring out of her mouth. I remember that my skin prickled with excitement. I had no idea of the meaning of what Grandmother was saying, but I absorbed what she was doing and the thrilling goodness of it all, with every pore of my body and mind. Later, as I learned to read and write I had gradually realized that my own mind could know and create a world as exciting as the one that my Grandmother knew, and to me the world of words had become one of limitless, lively possibility.

For me, when I had been a school child, things had not been any better than these past weeks had been for the children in my classroom. I remembered long boring days, years actually, where little made sense and less mattered. I had rarely asked questions or volunteered information in school. There had been nothing to say. None of the school work itself ever seemed to really touch me. Most of it was pretty easy. Anything to do with reading or writing was

easy. Most of the time I knew exactly what to do before the teacher ever opened her mouth when a work sheet was passed out, or a passage in a text book or workbook was assigned. Lists of rules about the way words worked never confused me. I never paid the slightest attention to the instructions. I would merely look at the example and extrapolate to the list of questions. If there was no example, I would quickly examine the questions for the relevant pattern. I was never wrong. Writing a paragraph with, "A good topic sentence" was no problem. Writing itself was never a problem. Most of the other children didn't seem to find it so easy. But what I had found odd about this was that it seemed to me that the things I knew had not been learned in school. The exercises were about details, patterns, differences and similarities between shapes and sounds that I just "knew." I seemed to have a subterranean, instinctive knowledge of how the words and the rules fit together. As I watched other children struggling, I often thought that if I had to learn in pieces like they did, I'd never be able to do it. It was just too hard to do it that way. How could you keep track of all the pieces? How could you learn all the rules, and especially the exceptions, if you really had to learn them one by one? While my intuitive knowing of the inner workings of language had never failed me, I saw most of my peers struggling to learn what I already knew.

When I was in grade four, several children in the class

were having difficulty reading. Mrs. Whimble had lined their desks up facing the side chalk board, and she wrote lists of words and word parts for them to read and copy. She told us that she had been to a teachers' meeting and had learned a new method, called "Phonics," that would help them. As I watched and listened, I realized that Mrs. Whimble was trying to help the children organize what they needed to know, to find the patterns, to see how easy it could be to learn to read and write when you saw the patterns and relationships between words. But as I watched, I remember thinking that this wasn't really going to work any better than her old look-say method. Breaking the words down into parts didn't make it simpler. Not really, because you had to know how they fit together before you took them apart, or you wouldn't know where the pieces were supposed to go. And if you knew how they fit together, then you knew. Being able to find those patterns had to come from within.

I was not far wrong. Even after many phonics lessons those children were still confused by the lists of word parts, and they were no closer to being able to read and write than they had been before. It seemed to me that without realizing it the teacher had just substituted one set of things the children didn't understand for another, and the children who needed help were no closer to understanding. Panic rose within me as I listen to what was

happening to them. I had had the feeling that if I attended to those lessons for too long, I'd forget everything I knew and then I wouldn't be able to read either. What these children didn't know was outside them. What I knew was inside me. For one devastating moment my feelings for them allowed me to sense what it could be like if my familiar ease with language slipped away and words stood in stiff rows, and I could no longer "just know" how they were related to each other, but instead had to figure it out from lists of rules. It would be like being trapped inside the Looking Glass with Alice in a world of perpetual distortion, a place meaningless and mad. I had pulled myself back to the task I was supposed to be doing. But I found that I could barely keep my eyes open over the workbook. I was simply bored. Independent Work, Mrs. Whimble called it. In Independent Work, because you could read, you sat quietly in your desk and filled in blanks while the teacher worked with the kids who couldn't. Talking to other children was forbidden. Isolation and boredom seemed to be all there was for me to learn from that school curriculum.

It had been so different at home, where I could read whatever I wanted, without interference from anyone. At home, when my chores were done, in my private time a book could make the whole world melting warm. Like the Christmas when I was twelve. Grandma had given me a copy of Black Beauty. Grandma always gave me a book for Christmas, and if

I was lucky, it would be a long novel that would take days to finish. On this particular Christmas day, I had gone upstairs to my room and shut the door. I didn't come down for hours. I had read, and read, and read, and had felt the flesh and breath of my own life merge with the life and times of Anna Seton. The drumming hooves of Black Beauty would forever be as my own heartbeat. Through the words, I had imagined the thoughts and feelings of people in another world and another time, and they had become my own. I came back from each such immersion, a person more experienced, more complete, more myself.

Are they the same thing, literacy and life? For me and my grandmother they seemed to be. I used to spend a week or so with my grandmother every summer. Thinking back, I was sure that it was this relationship that had formed my basic literacy, not my experiences in school. My grandmother had gone to school in Minnesota, and had finished Grade eleven there. She had come to Alberta in 1905 to homestead, and had taught herself everything there was to know about the English Classics, reading Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan and others by lamplight after her work was done, treasuring her few hundred books in the same way that she valued the people she loved. Sometimes she would read aloud, sitting in her willow rocker with an old tartan blanket pulled over her knees. The sound of her words poured over me in a sensual flood that I didn't understand, but oddly enough didn't need

to understand to enjoy. I knew that when her hand reached out to touch a book, it was with the same gentleness that she would touch my hair. It was this capacity for joy in books that my Grandmother had passed on to me. Something like that had happened that day between me and Phil. But what was it?

What was the essence of the appeal of all of this clutter of memories and impressions? What was it that had invited me, and could possibly also invite these children into the sensuality of reading and writing? What would entice them into the inside where literacy was being, and the urge to read and write was to become? Where the power of word was also the power of voice, and the possibility of self? Where the struggle to know was inner driven, and excitement in itself?

My memory flitted to another scene, back to when I was sixteen and had taken a music history exam. That was one time when I had used my ability to read and write for something that was clearly outside myself. There had been a text book, and sheaves of handwritten notes that my teacher had provided. I had meticulously gone through these, reading and re-writing them, and re-reading them again. Between the text and the extra notes, the history of the music of the western world, "From Plain Song to the Moderns," was covered in one hundred and seventy five pages, more or less. I had studied the book and the notes until I

knew them thoroughly. I had faced the exam, and did well, writing a short essay on Wagner's Ring, and another on Tchaikovsky's symphonies. I had scored over 95%, and my teacher was very pleased.

But, I had done it without hearing a single note of the music. At that time I'd had no access to a set of recordings such as the Norton Scores. Obviously my teacher hadn't thought that it was important for me to actually hear the music. Was that enough?

There was something about this experience that was uncomfortably like the way I had taught these past two months. I closed my eyes. It was bad enough to have experienced such a travesty, but had I really perpetuated another much the same?

My memory shifted again to another scene also from my sixteenth year, not long after the music exam. I had begun to write poetry. I would close myself into my bedroom and methodically open my mind and body to my feelings. The feelings would intensify into words, and I would write the words down. The words would draw me back day after day, into this intensely private place. I would try different combinations of words, letting the feelings inside my skin swim out onto the paper. I found that writing could be just as absorbing as reading a good book. But where reading was always a thrusting into the unknown and the future as well as a revisiting of the past, writing also demanded the

involvement of my immediate self. Writing was myself, all my past experiences, as well as a bringing forth of present. Writing brought me something more. I would mouth the words over and over, fascinated with their texture, their rhythm, and myself as their presence. The words seemed to give me a sense of substance. To feel my feelings and to put words to them was to say myself to be more than I yet was, to bring out of myself the dimensions and possibilities of worlds without end.

Throughout high school, I filled scribbler pages with dense little poems that I never shared with anyone. Later in college I kept writing, and shared a few with the English Literature Instructor. Ms. Atkinson held my scraps of paper, ran her eyes and her fingers over them, and said, "These are special. Really special. Keep writing. Keep going. I don't know how you're doing it, but you use adjectives just like Keats'." I had giggled at this, and held her praise warmly. I laughed at the thought of myself being compared to one of such stature, but at the same time I was not surprised. And of course I would keep writing. For me at that time, to not write would have been to not live.

But what had I learned in all of those experiences that could help me with the situation I was soon to face? "Twenty one first graders. And have a very nice summer."

I had been sitting a long time. I was chilled. But,

instead of getting up to go home, I wrapped my arms around myself and pulled my legs up to my chest. The chair was quite comfortable. I looked out the window. Outside, amethyst light shone through the pale, June sunset, and I wondered about the difference between the experiences I had had of my own personal literacy, and the way the children in this classroom had reacted to me and the way I had taught. Maybe some people could work with the readers and the teacher's guide in a way that would allow the children's days to be full of magic and laughter, but I now knew that I couldn't. Where was the valley of song? How could I give the children a chance to hear the music? How could they be invited to dance a warm, bubbly kitchen kind of dance in a classroom? How could the classroom become a place where they could explore, know, and create, and charm their very lives with words? How could I help them to find out that to read and write poetry and stories, and to attempt to express the inexpressible, was excitement enough for a lifetime? How could I show them that while listening to a story could make their eyes gleam for a few minutes, that this gleam could be far more than momentary pleasure? How could I bring them to an awakening of the possibilities of literacy as personal, infinite, joyful, serious play? How could they experience here the kind of play that is potent enough to bring the smooth control of inner purpose to awkward hands and feet, and the kind of play that would bring them each to

their own self knowing, to drink from that inner crystal spring which, once flowing, would never stop bringing strength and healing into their own lives? When it was such a natural thing for human beings to yearn to go outside themselves in space and time, and to deepen and enrich life through the use of symbols and words strung together as music, why was it so difficult, so foreign for some children? What could I do in school to nurture the natural tendency and ability of the human being to symbolize, and the body to express emotion and thought? For it is as normal as laughter for human beings to need to reach beyond themselves, whether it is by drawing figures on cave walls, by telling stories for one generation to gift to another, or by teaching the mind to accept the discipline and delicate serenity of haiku. It is as uniquely and powerfully a human activity to attempt to shape the depths of human experience through the form of the novel, as it is to simply scribble a grocery list while chanting the words as a toddler clings to your hip.

III

'Tis to create, and in creating live
A being more intense, that we endow
with form our fancy, gaining as we give
The life we image...
(Byron, 1812, part 7, lines 45-49)

How long I sat there alone that day, I didn't know. Perhaps I fell asleep, just as the building had. It must have grown very late, for shadows had collected in the corners of the room. I watched through half closed eyes as those shadows began to move. Out of nothing, a shape seemed to gather, and slowly the wisps drew together into the form of an old man. He was a robe clad oriental with a long, thin beard. I sat very quietly, so still that it seemed I myself must soon disappear into the grey, surrounding silence. My visitor looked much like the doll in the case at the end of the hall. Had the doll awakened and come to help me? Its eyes had always seemed to be so penetrating. The doll seemed to know my thoughts, and more than once I had had the feeling that it wanted to leap through the glass and march along with me to the classroom. I had been told that years ago a teacher had visited Japan and had brought back this doll as a gift to the school. It was very old and undoubtedly precious. Behind the doll, glued to the back of the case, was a painted garden with a mountain standing behind it in the distance.

I became aware of breathing that was not my own. Then,

it seemed that I heard a voice, as thin and high as that of wind over mountains, a voice that had not been used for a long time. It was the animate shadow of the doll, the kami, saying,

> Once there was a man, and there was a mountain. The man stood in the forest below the mountain, gazing up at slopes that towered far above. His body was veiled in leaves, and the forest sheltered him. The mountain listened to the man, and the man listened to the mountain. The mountain spoke to the man of the wonder of standing beneath the sun, of the pleasure of soft edged fern fronds against his skin, and filled his ears with the textured antiphony of shrill tree frogs and grumpy voiced toads. It spoke to him of the soothing cool of mist that wreathed its face early in the morning and then faded in the warmth of the mid-day sun. It spoke to him of having always been there. It spoke to him of solid-ness, and of the power of being itself, and the man spoke too. He spoke of his frailty, and of his wish to be more than he could be. He spoke of his need to be alone but not be alone, to save and savour all that he sensed while at the same time letting it go. He spoke of the never ending struggle to reach beyond himself.
>
> He was in awe of the mountain, but not because it was immense. He was in awe, not because of its physical

power, but because the mountain was part of himself, and he was part of the mountain. His sense of this sent a hush down into the roots of his being. Each morning as the mountain rose out of the mist the man found that same hush in his heart. It filled his mind with his body, and his body with his mind. It spoke to him of being, and it quivered at the edges of his non-being. The mountain was because it was, just as the man was because he was. And the man and the mountain were together in time, space, and place.

When the mountain sang through wind-whipped nights, the man sang. When the mountain shuddered with rock falls, and heaved as fault lines slipped, the man's eyes overflowed with tears, and his bones bent with the weight that it is to become who he must be. The man's heart shook with the power of the storms that pummelled the mountain's peak. His eyes glistened with the streams that tumbled down its sides. Its sparkling water was the only refreshment that he needed for his soul.

But time passed and the man went away from the mountain. Years later he died in a city far away with the sound of the wind in the pines flowing in his veins like blood, and always he remembered. Even in death he remembered, and his death was only a light sleeping, for the mountain remembered too, and rumbled.

In that same city, a son of his son woke one day with the sough of those same wind blown pines in his veins. He looked within where the moaning sounded, and found an outline of the mountain etched in his heart. As his eyes opened, he heard echoes of the same thunder of storms in and on the mountain that the father of his father had known. It was a trace of memory that had come unbidden, and unspoken, like mist down the mountainside, to stir his inner shadows.

Drifting softly, timeless and yet as tied to the morning as surely as to the dawn itself, the voice of the mountain rose within him. He found that he had it in himself to hear, and in that hearing he remembered something he wasn't quite sure that he knew. He sat and listened to the bubble of streams that he had never heard, and he listened to the ripple of leaves in the forest that he had never seen. Images drew themselves out of his listening, and he found that he had always been part of the bubbling, the rippling, the soughing, and the wind borne need to bring forth image.

Emptiness rose in his heart as he listened, and he knew that there was something that he must do. He must gather that mountain from within the mist, and let it speak to him from his own bones. He must recreate and hold the dimensions of its presence in his own hands, and thus reckon with the forest, the sky, the mountain,

and most of all his own desire. But how should he begin?

This son's son determined to build a garden through which he could hear the mountain. He went behind his house in the noisy, busy city, and listened to the silence between the beats of his own heart, and his hands began to move to this rhythm. He dug, planted, pruned, and listened again. He took care that this garden should be more than a random collection of plants, or a thoughtless green space in the midst of the bustle of a metropolis, anomalous and anonymous, a place without place. This garden would be a commemoration of the living mountain that flowed through his being. It would bubble out of his body as he attuned to silence of the forest, and to the mist and the thunder melding in his mind. This garden would be more than the reproduction of a mountain scene as his father's father had known it. It would be a repetition that would rise from image to thought, and then resound through his skin to his breath. This garden would reverence all that the others of his kind had known. It would be his own, and more than his own. This garden would belong to itself, to the mountain, to his father's father, and to his son's son, and because of it he would be more than he could be either within or without it. It would repeat both the scene and the

> sense that his father's father had known. But more than that, it would allow him to more fully know and become himself. And, as the mountain would speak itself both into and out of the echoing silence of his waking, in the resonance of garden and mountain would be his becoming.

I sat very still, letting the last whisper of old man's story wash through me. I drew a deep breath, and as I did so it seemed that his eyes had reached right into my being. Then he seemed to smile at me. While he had been speaking, the room had fallen even more deeply into darkness, and with his last words his form faded, became shadow, became echo, and he was gone.

Who was he? Where had he come from? Where had he gone? Was he the mountain? Was he the garden? The gardener? A dream? Another form of myself? Was he his own story? Or the spirit of the mountain? A shinto kami?

As I was hoping to attend a conference in August, I decided to spend some time in July preparing the classroom for the grade one children. Over the summer my thoughts often turned to the old man, and to his story of the mountain and the garden. I wondered when he would return. Mr. Foster seemed to think that my work was fine. Perhaps some of the other teachers would be willing to explore different possibilities, to find the way to allow the

something more.

I began to search the corners and shelves of my classroom and store rooms for materials that might be useful, wondering how to make the classroom into an open space, an emptiness that was not nothing, as the Old Man had suggested, a place where children could know reading and writing as a deeply personal adventure. How could I create an emptiness which would allow the children to find their way into gardens of the mind, where the children could sense the breathing presence of the mountain in their own lives and begin to create gardens, worlds, selves and literacies of their own?

That basic literacy was a goal of elementary education was clear to me. That I needed to create an environment in the classroom that would allow this to happen was also clear. That all the children I would have in my grade one class would be able to participate at some level I was sure. But, what is literacy? I knew that to me it meant all that was good in life. It meant warm relationships. It meant pleasure, stimulation and involvement. But, my long years of apprenticeship as a student in the school system, as well as my first two months of teaching had shown me that it didn't mean the same thing to everyone.

In the back of my mind I ran over how the word is commonly used.

"The literacy level of many young Canadians is

deplorable."

"What is the literacy rate here?"

"The literacy level has risen significantly."

"The literacy level has deteriorated."

"The literacy level in this country as compared to that of other countries in Europe is declining."

"Are you literate?"

"He is not literate. He can only 'make his mark'."

"Let's improve your literacy."

"What is the average literacy rate of females in this population?"

As a word, "literacy" seemed to be used to measure. But what was being measured? Is kitchen dancing, and is the experience of a story taking you out of yourself so you can find yourself in relation to other minds and experiences, something that is measurable? It didn't seem so. At least, it would not seem that you could measure this in the same way that a gross national product or a shoe size, could be measured.

Have we as a culture assumed that because we talk about literacy in instrumental, mechanical terms that it really can be measured, and so it can be taught and experienced that way, I wondered? Has the language itself bewitched us, so that we have been caught in a snare of our own making? Has an assumption that language can be reduced to a mechanism driven the reasoning behind teachers who have for

so long used the broken words and the stiff stories and the workbook pages full of holes to be filled? Was that the reason, at least in part, for so many children not knowing how fascinating reading and writing can be?

I reached for the Oxford dictionary that sat at the back of my desk. "Literacy: ability to read and write. The quality or state of being literate." "Literate: having some acquaintance with literature (now) able to read and write." Literati: men of letters; literate or learned class." "Literature: literary culture (archaic) etc." "Synonyms: reading ability, writing ability. Antonyms: illiterate: ignorant of letters; unlearned; unable to read. Etymology: ad L litteratus; f littera - letter." "Acquainted with letters or literature, educated, instructed, or learned, one who can read and write, as opposed to illiterate."

What is literacy? I was sure that there must be something beyond the definitions, the everyday instrumental usage where we assume that literacy has to do with economics, and the idea of literacy being desirable for the "well-trained work force." Literacy must be thought of as more than a collection of skills that allowed one to perform the functions of reading and writing. Literacy is not literal.

There was one word in the dictionary passage that stood out. Quality. In my experience, literacy had to do with a feeling of limitless freedom in tension with careful

attention to detail, much like the feeling of play that I remembered as a child.

Suddenly I felt the same sense of fully being, but at the same time losing my familiar self, that came to me when I wrote poetry. My heartbeat began to quicken with the excitement of making space for something new. I knew that my body was telling me that there was something important here. I sensed my body paying attention before the words formed in my mind, that there was a vital qualitative connection between play and literacy as I knew it.

If play and literacy felt much the same to me, then somehow they must be related. But how? And how could I allow this resonance full rein in the classroom?

In the storage room I found packages of crayons, coloured felt pens, and piles of paper. I brought them back to the classroom and arranged them on the shelves. I stacked the old readers, and the new workbooks that had been ordered for the class in a cupboard at the back of the room, and shut the door on them with a sense of trepidation. Was I really doing the right thing? Mr. Foster and the other teachers would think I was demented. Unprofessional. I knew I wanted change, but I didn't know what to do next. I would have to intuit my way as a teacher, just as I had intuited my way along as a reader and writer. I had to find a way of working with the children that would bring voice to my own experience of literacy, and at the same time would

allow them their own authenticity. It came to me that one reason for the sickening exhaustion that I had felt at the end of each teaching day last spring had been due to the fact that I had not been myself. I had been fulfilling a role and meeting a set of expectations that others had defined for me. I had not been who I really was. That gauze-like unreality that had seemed to separate me from the children had been there because I had not had the courage to tear it down and stand there before the children as myself, instead of as a teacher who would merely act as a cog in a wheel of an educational machine, grinding out lessons and delivering curriculum in the predigested bits that are considered suitable for the young. A teachers' conference was scheduled to take place in August. I decided to attend. Perhaps there I would find someone who would understand the questions that were puzzling me, and could help me to find others who were in the midst of similar dilemmas.

It seemed to me that if an instrumental definition of literacy was not adequate for either my experiential knowledge of life, or for my grade one classroom, what would be? How is literacy created? How is literacy improved? If it doesn't come from filling in blanks, where does literacy come from? If literacy is due to something beyond "training", how much could be due to creatively independent acts of individual minds? Is literacy cultural? If literacy is cultural, then I should be able to create a

classroom culture, a rich and energized place where children could begin to play with words, to immerse in the sensuality of language, and thus find for themselves a quality of literacy that would draw them in through their being, rather than stultify their consciousness with the thin, unsatisfying emphasis on "knowing about" language and literature, to which they had been accustomed.

I knew that Grandma's kitchen had been a place that was rich in langauge and in life. Was that why it had been so good for her literacy growth, I wondered. Were these children, the ones who couldn't read and couldn't seem to find a way in to the joy of reading and writing missing something in their homes? Didn't they have grandmothers who washed them with the sound of words as they washed their hands and cooked soup? Was that what I needed to do as a teacher? I smiled at the thought of setting up a kitchen in the middle of the classroom. That wasn't really what I meant. Although that might not be a bad way to begin, come to think of it. But, what I really needed to create was a classroom that had the qualities of Grandma's kitchen. What were those qualities of literacy-place? I felt that if I could answer that question, I would be well on the way to a better understanding of how to teach.

After all, I thought, children don't say "I'm illiterate", or "I'm becoming literate." The word seems to belong to the adult world. Isn't it an outside kind of

word? Outside of the way children are in the world? Children would be more likely to say "I'm not very good at spelling", or "I hate language arts" (if that term was familiar to them), or "Read me a story. I love bedtime stories." Or, "Lets go to the library", "It's my turn to read now", "I'm going to read now," or "I love this book."

Whatever literacy is, I thought, it is not struggling with the symbol system in a bored or a hopeless way. Who said, "Education is a quest for an authentic existence"? Heidegger? I couldn't remember for sure, but the idea seemed important.

I put the dictionary down. I knew I needed a way of bringing literacy to the classroom, that included the "inside", the excitement, the importance of the personal quest. I needed a living sense of literacy that left thoughts of measurement and economic productivity to the purposes of the adult world. What I really wanted to do was to allow children experiences in literacy that would admit the fundamental "I", the same I that I remembered sensing when I was immersed in play as a child, and that was so important to me when I wrote poetry, or read a novel. After all, it would be absurd if someone were to say "I am not literate but I enjoy reading and writing and other ways of playing with language", or "I am too literate to read this", or "I loved Wuthering Heights. The hours I spent immersed in that book were quintessential experience of my

fifteenth year, but I've never liked reading."

How we feel about the experience of reading and the book itself seem to be the same thing. There seems to be a point where one disappears into the other, and the fundamental I melts into the illusory and transitory. And yet, even though we know that the world we have created through reading or writing a text is not a world of substance, it is real.

Oftentimes the word world had seemed more formative and transformative to me than the one people called, "The real world."

I left the classroom for the day, having made a few changes that felt right. I would do more when I had figured out the next step.

I drove two miles down the road to the general store and parked under the dual signs that said, "General Store: Groceries and Dry Goods", and "Agents for Thompson and Sons Undertakers." I walked past a long series of old license plates and ancient stencilled tin announcements in favour of Coke-a-Cola, Blue Ribbon Baking Powder, and Red Rose Tea that had been nailed onto the plywood wall, and ran up the steps. There was a row of stools along one side of the store, where hamburgers, coffee, and lemon pie were served. As I walked through the store, I could feel silence spreading ahead of me. Eyes stared. I felt awkward. My skin prickled. I was new here and both my skin and those

staring eyes knew it. I swallowed the lump in my throat and ignored the lostness that assailed me. I pushed both body and mind past the discomfort, determined to find what I needed as fast as possible. I was motioning to a clerk to cut a wedge of cheese when I heard them behind me at the lunch counter.

Girl: "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

Boy: "To get the dog!"

Girl: "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

Boy: "To get the cat!"

Girl: "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

Boy: "To get the dinosaur!"

Girl: "Why did the dinosaur cross the road?"

Boy: "To get the cat!"

Boy: "Why did the cat cross the road?"

Girl: "To get the monkey brains!"

Boy: "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

Girl: "To get to the other side!"

Right there, in the middle of the General Store, two children were creating and re-creating an old joke, a bit of the word world, the world of mind. They explored many versions of the same pattern, and once in a while one of them told the 'right' answer, "To get to the other side!", just to get an extra laugh. They seemed to be taking immense delight in postponing the obvious, and in keeping the word play going. I grinned. Great fun, I thought.

This was the kind of thing Grandma and me would have done together! The children were immersing themselves in a form of language for the sheer pleasure of it, and in so doing, were creating their own environment, expanding their own understanding, and becoming a living part of the conventions of a culture.

Unfortunately, as the children were soon to realize, not everyone within hearing distance was appreciative. The adults sitting near them on the red oilcloth stools were not amused. One of them tried to explain that the jokes the children were telling weren't really jokes because they weren't really funny. Another soon insisted on quiet. After all, enough was enough. These adults seemed embarrassed, and of the opinion that the language play was loud, inconvenient, and boring. From the adult point of view, such childish absurdity bordered on the rude. When the children failed to respond to these admonitions, their parents took them out of the store.

I left soon after, my hands full of bags, wondering why the children's experimentation within language would be considered inappropriate. Was it just because it was noisy? I thought not. As I put the key into the ignition and stepped on the clutch, it suddenly struck me that adults often reacted to children's language play this way, as though it was bad.

I slid back into the car seat, gripped the steering

wheel, and rested my chin on my hands. Another incident flashed through my mind. Was it related? Last summer I had been walking through a Woolco store in a shopping centre. I had heard a child, chattering away as he rode on his father's shoulders. Father and son were making their way through the bath towels and shower curtains, and the child, whom I estimated to be about three years old, had been talking to himself, making syllables of sounds out of the bubble of his own flow of words. His voice rippled up and down, and he used patterns of inflection that seemed familiar and yet not familiar to my ear. After a moment I realized that he was imitating the tones and rhythm of a nursery rhyme. But he was making up his "words" out of fragments. He was using English phonemes in an English-like sequence, and chattering with intense abandon. Even though this chatter had flow and rhythm, because of the new-born words his speech sounded like unformed nonsense, a gibberish without purpose or meaning. He had seemed to be so proudly mounted, like a king on the top of his world, his voice making a fine cascade of sound. But, just as I was trying to remember which nursery rhyme the child was playing with, or that was playing within him, his father noticed me. He immediately and brusquely told the boy to be quiet, probably not realizing that I had been staring out of fascinated appreciation.

I couldn't remember my grandmother reacting like these

adults to the noisy confusion of this kind of play. What would be wrong with just accepting this kind of nonsense as necessary and normal, and that children do it because they need to? Even in the classroom?

It seemed to me that if children play with language because they need to, then it must be because it helps them to become who they are. The intensity of the expression on the faces of these children, and the delight in their voices made it clear that both mind and heart were involved. Their "games" seemed to show persistence and real commitment. Something else that struck me as important was that the children had not been playing alone.

Or, if not actually playing with someone else at the moment, like the little boy riding on his father's shoulders, the games were a way to revisit, or remember and repeat something heard at another time, and in another situation where others had been involved. I suddenly realized that literacy is like language. That is, it is basically social, and not something that can be done alone. A silent classroom in which children faced forward in straight rows could not be a play space.

I rested my head in my hands, and let myself remember the sounds of the child's nursery rhyme chant. How had he learned to listen in the first place? Is to listen the same as to hear, and thus something we simply do, an elemental perception like taste, or touch? Or is listening somehow

more than that, and shapes that which is heard? This boy, it seemed, had made something new from previous hearing as he rode along on his father's shoulders. Someone, somewhere had read, recited, or sung, nursery rhymes to him, and thus, this river of sound was in him to re-create in his own way. Was this the beginning? If so, of what? How?

Would such activities seem to be less absurd, messy, noisy or inconvenient if one simply joined in, or just let them be?

Is there always a purpose beyond the obvious, I wondered, even in the chatter of little children?

Is there purpose especially in the chatter of little children?

## IV

I become Portion
of that around me...
(Byron, 1812, line 680)

It was the kind of August afternoon when the sky outlined the trees with a special sharpness, the air unusually still and clear. It was the kind of day that was likely to follow an early morning frost. As I backed the car away from the general store, I suddenly decided not to drive back home, but to go down to the river to sit on the bank and relax for a while. I turned the car toward the

river flats that were aflame with red willow, and parked along the roadside. I followed what seemed to be a deer path through the high bush cranberries, aspens and birch trees to the gravelly bank of the river. I found a large, flat piece of brown sandstone near the bank, near enough to be overhung by a silver willow, and settled down to enjoy the sound of the water, and to watch the light fade from the afternoon sky.

I gradually realized that I was not alone. Further under the willow, sitting on another flat stone, was my friend, the old man, the gardener.

I laughed when I saw him, I had been so sure that he would come again. He bowed to me politely, but he did not speak, so I sat quietly, waiting. I was sure he would begin when he was ready. I trailed my fingers in the water and stared into the rivulet that swirled past the stone on which I sat. The water rippled and flashed, gurgled and danced. I concentrated so completely on the rhythm of the water that I didn't notice when the Old Man began to speak. It was later that I realized that this time, his voice and the sound of the river were almost the same.

> "How will a grandfather show the children the ways of the river without a river? Here, the sound of the living river is never far away. Children need the running water to lure them. They need to be with the river, as we are now. They need to hear the sound of

the water chattering over small stones along the brink, and the roar of water crashing boulders against each other in the swift, deeper channels. If they could sit with us on the bank, they could hear the thunder of boulders tumbling downstream, and they might think it is thunder. They might look up into the sky, waiting for a flash of lightning that doesn't come. They might wait for the flash and listen for the next crash of thunder, and then call out for us to come to explain, that it isn't lightening, and it isn't thunder. It's only the river.

The children need to feel their fingers ache with cold, from washing them in rock pools before the sun has climbed over the top of the hill. Only then will they be able to notice that it takes until noon before the shallow rock pools are warm enough to play in. They will notice that in those warm rock pools the minnows flash like grey shadows of thought, the water so clear and still and the minnows so quick that it is difficult to tell which movement belongs to the minnows and which to their shadows. They will spend hours trying to match their quickness to that of the minnows, and, tiring finally, lift their eyes to see a "spider" walking across the water. They will tell us about it later, and you or I might tell them that that kind of spider is called a water strider... And later they

might wonder about this difference.

They will wade into the water, and feel it rushing against their boots, squashing the cold rubber sides flat against their legs, they may suddenly feel confused and afraid because there is too much sound and too much water moving too fast. They will learn how to enter the flow without losing themselves completely. If the water rushes so that it frightens them, they nust learn how to calm their panic, and to fix their eyes on a point on the bank. Holding fast to this thread of being, they must learn how to pull themselves along until they are themselves once again. Their taste for adventure filled. The rest of that morning they will spend skipping rocks, finding just the right thinnish, flattish stones that usually have faint pink and grey rainbow stripes. They will practise sending them flying and dipping with a life of their own.

From the river, the children will learn to read. They will perceive and mark in great detail, its depths, its power, and its moods. They will learn that it is one colour in the morning on a day when there will be rain in the afternoon, and another in the afternoon when there hasn't been rain for weeks. They will know that the river is a different colour again when there has been a storm high up in the mountains, and still another when summer begins to laze toward autumn. The

children will hear the crows discussing the encroaching frost, their claws tipped in mud as they tear apart the carcass of a rotting fish. Standing back, silently, they will watch the birds at their meal and wonder about the hint of worry that they hear just beneath the rude rattle of the scavenger's tongues. They will wonder what death is that the fish doesn't suddenly turn to quicksilver under the tearing beaks and fling itself back into the river, and flash away... Most of all, they will learn that wherever they go the river will always be. And, as they first brought themselves to the river, so the river will pour out of them, rolling silently through the hidden channels of deep mind and body memory, and bringing forth its treasures as needed.

From playing in the river, the children will become the river.

But how will we teach? By a comment now and again, or an apt answer to a question perhaps, but mostly by being ourselves, each of us our own river. We will teach through being-there, by letting them see that when lightening flashes, we are not afraid.

Each of us enters, and then becomes the river in a unique way. Some of these ways of being are quiet and meander along valley floors that are choked with glacial outwash, sometimes forming oxbow lakes that

have a depth, clarity, and beauty all their own, while others creep out along sandstone shelves to trickle down gravelled beds in tentative braids, and still others charge over rock cliffs unpredictable and wild. As adults we still hold something of the stance taken by our small bodies swaying in these currents, and remember that each bit of being that we named there, came to us with joy, structured by nothing less than the warmth of sunshine and the steady care to be found in our eyes. To name in this way is more than knowing. It is being.

Knowing such as this is literacy. It continually emerges as playful mind, and is an inseparable spiral, a welling of being and life that comes with and is of both self and other. It is an immersion from which naming folds back into itself, and we are the same and yet not the same as we go on within wherever it is that we find ourselves, moment by moment, flowing on and never stopping.

How is this literacy? Consider children's words. It seems that children's words play like water over rocks, literally chattering and finding their own way down to the sea. Always chattering, and always finding their own way, children bring forth themselves.

In the river, in the garden, and in this chatter of children, nature retells a storyline embedded deep in

> mother earth. Nature speaks herself. Springing from the heart of a mountain, this river of sense tumbles down its side in an enfolded lyric. The river articulates both its own presence and the face of the mountain. These layers of voice, chatter, silence, and repetition, run through the worlds of flesh, stone, water, and mind. One is the other. All are one. None are as they seem, and for the one who can hear, all that seems, is."

He had finished speaking, and his form faded into the shadows of the rippling water. I closed my eyes to hold onto his image. I savoured the gentleness of his voice. I did not want him to go.

# PART TWO

## I

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple tree
Not known because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
(Eliot, 1942)

On July 29 of that same year, I packed a small suitcase and drove twenty miles to the west, to an Annual Teachers' Summer Literacy Conference. The conference site, located high in the mountains of western Alberta, was a stately old hotel overlooking a lake as deep, cold, clear and blue as the sky above. I mulled over the program, standing on the steps of the hotel, facing a mountain wind that whipped the water. I had always loved wind. It stirred me. Its force was always able to make me more sharply aware of both my physical being and my inner thoughts.

One session caught my eye. It was entitled simply, "Conversations." It was scheduled to begin that morning and last for the whole day. The program description was seductively simple: "Led by Allan Thompson, this session will provide teachers a venue in which they may discuss their personal experiences of literacy learning, as well as

explore practical implications of the child centred classroom."

I climbed the steps to the main foyer, and went along the hall way to the designated room. There, I found seven other people seated on straight backed chairs under a vaulted oak ceiling. As I joined the group, a young man wearing a name tag pencilled "Allan", identified himself as the leader, and began to speak.

"The intent of this session is to provide an opportunity for us to share experiences, questions, and problems that relate to our individual classrooms. To open our discussion, I'm planning to share some of my personal experiences, and then the floor will be open to any of the rest of you to contribute. I believe that one of the major problems in teaching today is that teachers don't have time to talk to each other, so the main purpose of this session is to do just that. We will talk about our experiences and frustrations, and hopefully we will be able to return to our classrooms in a few weeks, more clear about our needs and purposes for children's literacy, because of what we will have accomplished here."

Allan continued, sharing some of his life experiences, saying, "Why am I here? I took a langauge arts class at university last year that provoked my thinking about how I teach. In that class, I was challenged to think about my own personal experiences with literacy, and I was surprised

at how much I learned during that reflective process. I knew that I had had very negative experiences in school when I was a child, and that these experiences still affected me. One of the requirements of that university class was that I write a reflective journal about my own experiences of literacy, and another requirement was that I read a children's book of my choice to the class. I also was required to read aloud one entry from my reflective journal to my classmates."

Allan shifted in his chair, and leaned forward. "By this time in my life, I had successfully completed three years of university, and I was determined to complete this language arts course as well. But I was very concerned about having to expose myself to classmates through my reading and writing. I worried about it constantly. It was like I had suppressed my feelings about language arts for years. It may sound like it would be easy for a third year education student to read aloud any children's book of his or her choice to a group of peers, and write briefly about a personal experience with literacy and share it, but for me it was torture."

All eyes were on Allan, as he wrapped us in his story. He continued, "I went to talk to the woman who was teaching the class. I was shaking all over and hadn't slept for two days. I told her I wanted to drop out of the class, and she got me to explain why. She said to just take it easy, and

do the best I could. She wanted me to try, but she'd let me off the hook if I just couldn't do it. Well, I managed to read a children's book and one of my journal entries to the class. I chose a book for very young readers called, 'Too Many Chickens.' I was really nervous, but I felt good afterwards. As I sat up there in front of everyone a lot of old feelings came back, mostly bad ones. I was sure glad that some of the class joked around with me a little bit at the beginning. Come to think of it, I was the only one that they bugged before reading. Maybe I had revealed to them in my actions, that I was nervous. This joking around calmed me a little. I know I made a few reading errors but kept on going. Over all I felt pretty good about my reading."

Allan paused here, and took a drink of water. It seemed as though the effort of revisiting his memories had drained him. After a moment, he went on, "For the next two days, I had a constant headache. I kept throwing up. I couldn't keep anything down. It was nerves, from having to read in class.

However, it was during this same university language arts class, that I gradually began to take risks with literacy for the first time in many years. First with reading, and then with writing. When I noticed that my attitude towards my own reading and writing was beginning to change, I wondered what had gone wrong in the first place. My purpose here is to initiate a similar reflective process.

One of the questions we discussed in that university class was whether or not literacy could be playful. Literacy, playful? Because of my childhood experiences, I had never thought of literacy as being playful because my own experiences had been so bad. I had to really think about it. Then one day when I was sitting in the park, the answer came to me. Yes, literacy and play are related. Here's how I came to that conclusion. I was sitting a few feet away from four little children who were playing. They must have been about four or five years old. They were playing with their dolls. One child said, "Let's pretend we are going swimming." Another child said, "OK" and they made the dolls pretend to be swimming. Next thing you know, they were talking about being teenage mutant turtles and were making the dolls dance around doing karate and so on.

As I watched the children play, I noticed a lot of verbal communication going on back and forth. Some of the sentences made sense. Others did not, but it didn't stop the children from talking back and forth. In a way they were not just playing with dolls, but playing with language. Practising the art of discourse. Practising the difference between past and present and future tense. While they were playing and practising there was no wrong or right way of doing it. No one was there saying, 'That is wrong' 'You do not say it that way.' I realized that play is actually a good way to learn literacy because the learner is not

restricted.

Thinking back to my own past, I enjoyed reading when I was very young. I remember being five years old and starting school, embarking on a new experience that would change my life forever. I remember my mother and I walking, holding hands, toward the corner to meet the school bus. I was full of excitement. I do not recall much about my first year of school, but I do remember one day coming home and telling my mother I could read. Taking out 'My Little Red Story Book' and opening it up, I began to read: 'See Tom. See Tom run. See Tom and Flip.' I am not sure if I could really read or if I had just memorized the words to fit the pictures.

When I was seven or eight years old I wrote a letter to my Grandmother about coming to stay with her. I enclosed a recipe for strawberry shortcake so she could make it for me. I have very few memories of my childhood, but this one is quite strong. I can close my eyes and see myself on the stairs in my house, writing that letter. I enjoyed writing that at this time in my life.

This enthusiasm for literacy soon faded. Except for these two experiences, I do not remember having any good experiences with language arts during the years I was in school.

What happened? How did my feelings toward reading and writing change so drastically during my years in school? By

Grade Three, reading period, as we called it, was very unpleasant for me. We had to stand beside our desks and read our reading lesson out loud. I was the poorest in my grade at reading aloud. I stumbled and fought my way through each paragraph. To help me out my teacher made me read twice as much as my fellow classmates, and then they would make fun of me. I was poor to begin with, but making me read aloud more did not help me to become a better reader. However, it did instill a great dislike for reading aloud, and if anything it made me more afraid to read aloud to my peers. Why did my teacher expect me to be like the others? Why did she focus on this weakness to the exclusion of any gift or ability I might have had?

Friday was an exciting day for most of the children, because it was the end of the week. However, Fridays were not good for me, as it was our weekly spelling day. I would spend my first recess writing out each word I got wrong 20 times. I don't think this helped me in the long run, because to this day I can't spell. In that situation there was only one right way, and I, try as I might, could not find it.

I had learned to dislike writing as well. In Grade Four I wrote a Cowboy and Indian story in which the Indians won the battle. I handed it in to my teacher. She read it and told me to change the ending because the Indians should not have won. I went back to my desk and changed the

ending. At the time I did not know or understand why I had to change it. I know now that I should not have had to do so. I know now that there is more than one right answer to any particular question.

In school my written work always seemed to be misunderstood, or I had to change it. It never seemed to be right. This made me feel that my work wasn't good enough. Years of having my written work and oral reading put down in school left me worrying about my writing abilities. When you get this treatment over a long period of time, you begin to believe it. Even today logical reasoning tells me this is not so, but emotions overtake logic.

I feel that I am living proof that the ideas my teachers held about reading and writing education, and how children learn, didn't always work. What were those ideas, and why did they affect me so adversely? I learned to dislike reading very much. Even now, although I am a teacher, I find it a chore, and hard work. Reading is the last thing I would do for pleasure or leisure. As an adult, I found that I could read aloud in front of children, but I still had great difficulty in front of my peers. Reading to my peers was like stepping back in time. I couldn't breathe or pronounce my words the way I wanted to. I would still get confused and want to throw up. As far as I was concerned, I was just a farm kid, and literacy was like great works of art, something completely beyond me.

When I think about one kind of reading that I did enjoy, it was comics. I had a big pile of comics. Not just any type of comics. They were Sergeant Rock, Rawhide Kid, Jonah Hex, and so on. Hero comics. I used to read late at night, with a flashlight. I read these comics until I left home to live on my own. After that I didn't read at all for at least a couple of years, until I decided to go to college. I guess the comics were an escape from everyday life. But there were things in my life that I was really good at. Calculus for example. I could do anything with math. For me, math was a way of communicating. It was a better way of communicating than the English language. Math, like music, can go beyond the traditional boundaries that everyday language can create."

Allan smiled at us, but his face changed expression again as he carried on with, "Because of the fact that my writing had never been accepted as it was I had learned to re-write everything, letters, everyday notes, lists, as well as 'spontaneous' journal entries. But for that university class last year, I started to just let my words come out. I felt this would help me to overcome the need to re-write everything, and give me some confidence. In our classroom, what is it to make a place for others to learn, a safe place, where they can take risks and explore, and not be afraid to be wrong?

It is my experience that although I strive for child

centred programming, I work in an educational system and a society that seems to pressure me to forget the child... I do not blame my teachers or the school system for my problems or for the way they taught me. They didn't know any better since they were teaching with the current educational theories of the time period. I am concerned though that in the future, the current teaching methods we are using may actually be harmful to our future students. Who knows? That is the problem with teaching and dealing with the learning abilities of children. We do our best to act responsibly, and we go on. But I feel that part of our classroom ethics must be to try to make sense of it all. How does our past affect our present? How does how we feel connect with what we know? What does it mean to believe that children can be trusted to learn what they need to learn, in a society that seems to have a basic mistrust of children? What does it mean to know that there is more than one right way and more than one right answer, in a society that doesn't want to take time to sort through complexity, but expects instant answers?

Now, why have I chosen to share these experiences here? It's not because I want your sympathy, or just to influence you to not make your students read aloud if they are poor readers. It's not to try to convince you to stop hassling your students to change their writing. For today let's talk and think about our own literacy experiences and any

relevant issues that come up. I'd welcome anyone here to speak up and share your thoughts. By the end of the day we may have shed some light on the questions. The purpose of this session is not really to find answers to these questions. At least I'm not going to set out to find any answers. We're here to explore. Whatever any of us takes back to our classrooms will be something we have created out of our own words, and our own reflections on personal experience. We will take away with us whatever understanding we have brought forth in ourselves, and in this group."

A blonde woman sitting beside me spoke first. She said, "My name is Marion. I'm from a small town, and have two young children of my own. I have worked in family day homes as a teacher, and someday I hope to work as a classroom teacher in the public school system. I had such a different kind of experience from Allan's, because I usually did well in school. But I know I have children in my classes who have had experiences that are like Allan's, that shut them down as learners. I think literacy is all communication, whether it is literacy in math or language, or whatever. Literacy is the ability to express oneself. We are continually seeking more knowledge, attempting to become more. We grow through language. Language bonds us to other people, and works as a social medium. We get that from our families beginning the day we're born. We really

need safety in our relationships with others, in order to learn, and it seems that Allan's teachers didn't give him the kind of emotional safety he needed."

A woman with deep brown eyes and short brown hair, who identified herself as Jocelyn responded next. She said, "I have grown children and have been a teacher for many years. I grew up in England and went through the British Infant Schools, and then was placed in an academic stream even though my family was working class. I'm interested in what Marion was saying. Yes. I think I know what you mean. I know that my love for reading and writing came initially from my experiences with my family. But the schools I went to, at least when I was quite young, fostered that as well. By social medium do you mean a place to flourish, be safe, and grow, Marion?"

Marion nodded. "Yes. The social medium is all the communication we have as part of the family we're born into, and all the other interactions and experiences we have. The classroom should be like a family, in that it is an extension of this safety, and should allow for constant interaction. Literature is part of the safe place too. I loved to be by myself and read at the end of the day. For example, I remember reading the 'Five Little Peppers and How They Grew'. I was six and a half years old. We were living in Seattle. I had just come to the part in the book where the oldest daughter had bandages over her eyes from some

illness, the measles I think. She was crying, although this was the worst thing she could be doing as it only made her eyes worse. Anyway, I remember crying along with her, and wishing I could do something to make things better for this family, the Peppers. I guess that although I realized it was only a book, I wanted to make things better, to help these fictional characters. They were like a real family to me. I laughed with these storybook people when they laughed, and grieved with them over their sorrows. For me, as the oldest child in our family the most wonderful time in the whole day was when my brothers went to bed. It was quiet then and I could be alone. It was a time when I could escape into the make-believe world of literature. I had no desire to live anyone's life other than my own, but I wanted to gain insight into other people's lives and experiences using literature as the way. The life I lived with my family extended into the books I read, and the life I shared with the books I read extended back to my family too. Books were part of my social world because my mom read to us, and we enjoyed stories."

Jocelyn responded quickly, saying "I had that love for literacy before I went to school too. And, I suppose I had a lot of experiences with reading and writing when I was still quite young. I remember once, when we were travelling on the train to Cardiff where we went every summer, and my father was telling strangers sharing the train with us, how

well I could read. I felt such pleasure and so much pride. It was heaven to hear my father talk that way about me. Just as it seems to have been hell for you, Allan, to have had people react to you negatively."

Marion replied, "I don't think I ever realized before listening to you talk Allan, how a person's sense of self is connected to their ability to communicate, or to literacy. I can see how you would have a feeling of frustration at not being able to express yourself adequately, and you would have a feeling of having failed, and not being a whole person. It is communication that helps us to gain knowledge about the world around us and to experience perspectives other than our own. Language inhibits that if we do not share the same or similar language."

Jocelyn asked, "So do we need to create classrooms where there can be a shared language, and allow for this social medium? I can see how if shared language is so important to us, that shared literature would be important to children too. As an emergent reader in schools, there was a very social approach to literacy. My teachers acted as though I could read. I was encouraged to write and read. There was an atmosphere of trust. We were encouraged to read, but I do not recall being directed what to read. I found reading useful in school, and was frequently read to. There were discussions about what we read. We were trusted to develop literacy, but we were not formally instructed.

Were the teachers allowing for playfulness in literacy? I remember that we were given a wide range of reading and writing experiences. We focused on using reading and writing. I remember that we read Lamb's Tales of Shakespeare, and Wind in the Willows. And novels, and always, poetry. The poetry is with me still. Those are the poems I still read and enjoy."

At this point, another blonde lady whose name tag identified her as Crystal burst into the stream of conversation. It seemed that she just couldn't remain silent any longer. She began with, "My early literacy experiences were very different from Marion's and Jocelyn's. Excuse me for breaking in here, but when you talk about the safety and trust you experienced, I just can't relate. For me it wasn't that way. My experience was more like Allan's. My parents were hard working good people but they had little time, or knowledge of the importance of spending time reading with my brother and me in our early childhood years. We were read to on occasion. I do recall Sambo, Br'er Rabbit, Br'er Fox, Tar Baby and the Little Red Hen. But I did not know how to read or write when I entered grade one. My grade one teacher was terrible. I have nothing but bad memories of struggle and rejection. I unfortunately, had the same teacher in grade three. I feel that I was at a great disadvantage in those very important years. When I started grade one I'm sure I had never had any kind of

writing thing in my hand. I didn't know how to write my name. My parents were busy trying to survive. They didn't have the luxury of going to school. I didn't have anything as background. My grade one teacher had no time for someone like me who didn't know anything. She liked the prissy, fussy girls who were dressed up in frills. I've seen pictures of myself, and I was a nice looking kid, but not like that. I remember rooting through the garbage can in my grade one class, trying to find something with my name written on it so I could get the spelling. The teacher's whole world seemed to be just her little pets, and the rest of us, she could have given a rat's ass damn about. Whoops, I'm sorry! Consequently I was turned off of school. I didn't feel like I learned. I escaped into a dream world. I just went into a pretend world because the teacher spent her time with her pets and they could do no wrong. The rest of us just struggled along on our own. Trust or trusted was the last thing I felt."

Allan interjected, "It was painful?"

Nodding, Crystal agreed, "It was painful. I've never used that word before, but yes. It was just awful. I'm a very social person now and I have a lot of confidence, but I still find it painful and I keep thinking of it. I've struggled. I struggled with language arts all the way through my schooling, right to Grade Twelve. Even now, I edit something fifteen times before I hand it in. I can

talk my way out of anything, but I feel inadequate about my writing. I have no problem speaking to Premier Getty or his wife. That does not intimidate me for one second. But to write something, that makes me shake. I've been a teacher for many years too, and have grown children. But I've never been able to shake the feeling of those first terrible years."

Elizabeth, a woman with long brown hair and gentle eyes spoke next. She began, "I have grown children and have taught a long time as well, and like Jocelyn, I grew up in England where I went through the British Infant School system. I don't know what I'd do if I felt the way you and Allan do. For me, literacy is something that helps me get through the day. If I don't read every day, I feel dead."

Jocelyn, looking first at Crystal and then at Elizabeth, spoke again. "Maybe I can relate to what Crystal is saying, even though my experiences were generally more positive. As an adult, for a short time I studied another language, and the syllabic alphabet used to write that language. The syllabic symbols were phonetic, and although I decoded the symbols into sounds slowly, I was doing OK. But I knew that I didn't have a clue what I was reading. I didn't know enough of the language. I had a similar experience later when I lived in Russia for a while, and I didn't know either the language or the alphabet. I had to rely on finding someone who spoke English. I felt robbed of

my independence. I felt shut out and helpless. It was like I didn't belong, but even worse than that. It was like I couldn't belong. So it seems to me that language is more than literacy. Literacy is only one aspect of language, but in that particular experience, I felt the disruption of sharing and safety, and trust as well."

I felt that I had been silent long enough. I said, "My name is Mari, and I have only been a teacher since May. May the first, this year. I had a Grade Three/Four class, and in September I will be teaching Grade One. I'm really interested in what everyone is saying. I wasn't happy with the way my classroom was working, although I seemed to be the only one who felt something was wrong. Maybe this discussion will help me to figure out why I wasn't happy."

Then, I looked at Crystal, and queried, "When you say that you were unhappy and so you escaped into 'a pretend world', Crystal, do you mean the kind of pretend world that Marion meant? By pretend do you mean an escape, more than a mental play-space where you worked things out? Like Jocelyn felt in the situation you just described, you also felt that you didn't belong?"

Crystal seemed lost in thought for a few moments, and then explained, "At school it was just withdrawal. At home though, I had a little group of kids in the neighbourhood and I would make pretend church. I would stand at the pulpit, a box or something, and lead the singing, and I

would read whatever I could, or pretend to read. I was playing with literacy there I guess, but not in school. School was just survival."

Picking up on what Crystal had said, Marion offered, "But at home you were making a pretend world where you could read and be safe? Like one day at church, my little three year old son took a Bible out as we were singing a hymn. He flipped through it until he came to what he thought was an appropriate page. He pretended to read and sing the song we were singing. So what if it was the wrong book and page. The point is that he was modelling the actions of a reader through what he was seeing around him. And, judging from the way he looked at the print and pretended to sing along, he already sees himself as a reader. At home when we read stories together, Joshua is often given the opportunity to read the parts he knows. And we trace the words with our fingers. He is not ready to take the risk of pretend reading a whole book which he knows yet, but at times I find him pretend reading little cloth books to his nine month old sister. He loves to pretend write. He is very interested in words which are found on packages and bits and pieces of paper, receipts, what is written on clothes, tags, buttons, and so on. Everything he sees around him. We spend a lot of time reading together. But we don't very often read the same book twice in a short time, as we have a large collection of books and I enjoy reading different ones. But

I'm thinking that perhaps I should read some favourites more often. That would give him the chance to memorize larger parts of the stories, and from what he knows about the story he can predict what the words will say, and that way he will learn to pay attention to the print? So the text already means something to him, and from this he can learn to read?"

Jocelyn nodded, replying, "I would go along with that. I think that there are children who live in homes where they see reading modelled, and within their social group they come to accept reading as an attractive, praiseworthy activity. These kids are encouraged to read, and probably do. This includes kids like myself who were surrounded by books and always encouraged to read even though my parents were not particularly well educated. Then, there are those who seldom see reading modelled, and have few books in the home. This group is probably a majority, and always has been, and these are the kids who probably don't become effective readers, at least not without more of a struggle. They're kind of at a disadvantage right from the beginning. Can we help them to make it up? Or is it already too late by the time they come to school?

What I'm trying to explore is how my childhood reading shaped me. Allan and Crystal remember how certain incidents that were repeated over and over had a negative effect on them. I know that it is because I enjoyed reading as a child that I turn to books for entertainment as an adult.

Because I read as a child and developed that reading ability, I went through school with some degree of success. Childhood reading has given me options as an adult. I knew I could go to University, for example, and become a teacher. If I wanted to. My father's pride in me, and his confidence in me, was a big part of my own confidence in myself."

Elizabeth interjected, "That really makes sense to me. My literacy memories seem to be of times when reading/listening were for enjoyment. I would say that it was the enjoyment, something that is intangible, combined with the repetition of favourite stories and poems, something that you could say is tangible, was what gave me the security that I needed. The security came from the family, a social thing, as well as from the familiarity of the literature. Security was a big part of my success."

Crystal acknowledged Elizabeth's comment, and added,"Yes. Does that give us a clue about how our classrooms should be? If reading and writing come best through security and a positive situation? We should let children experience the joy that can be gained in reading and writing? But that seems too simple in a way."

Elizabeth smiled at her, and answered, "I am certain that play and pleasure with literacy helps children to learn words. It makes them curious and anxious to get involved in reading and writing."

"Reading absorbed my attention when I was a child, just

like you Elizabeth", replied Jocelyn. "But how about this? I also remember playing a game with my mother's button box. I was sitting by the hearth, on the floor. I had the tall rectangular tin box with the hinged lid that my mother kept buttons and darning things in. The box was kept in the top left hand front corner of the wardrobe that stood at the bottom of the stairs, by the front door. The box was dark in colour, with paint scratched off. Probably an old tea tin. The buttons became children, and the heel form for darning socks became a roundabout. The children went to the playground and played. They talked and chatted to each other as they played and moved about the playground. I don't know how often I played that game. I also remember that when I was a little older, I decided that I wanted to play that button game again. I got out the button box. I must have been older because I remember I got it for myself. I spilled the contents of the box out on the floor beside me. But there was no magic, nor involvement. They were just buttons. I remember feeling disappointed about that. Had I outgrown the game, or outgrown that childhood ability to create a world from just anything? I know I still had that ability to be totally involved in an imaginary world when it came to books. But that world was not totally of my own making. What does that mean for literacy?"

There was silence for a few moments. It was Marion who responded saying, "Well, for one thing, you find out a lot

about yourself in play situations. Play is looking for meaning. It's like your play reveals something about you, and about your literacy as well. Maybe you were at the point where you were growing up and you could mind-play with a book, and so you didn't need the button-box kind of play so much any more. I think that there cannot be play without literacy."

Crystal commented, "Literacy is more than reading and writing, then? I'm finding that it's very therapeutic for me even just to look at my childhood literacy experiences. It has brought back good and bad memories. It is a self discovery that after all these years, maybe things weren't as bad as I thought they were. How else would I have arrived at where I am today? Maybe part of the reason why that teacher turned out to not be good for me was because of my own lack of experience."

"You didn't know how to connect with each other?," I inquired.

"I guess not." Crystal looked sad, as though she was still the little girl who had been so unhappy.

Again there was a moment's pause. It was Allan who asked, "So why did you decide to become a teacher?"

The expression on Crystal's face brightened, and she explained, "There were two things. I've always had a love for people, and like I said, I used to play Church and Sunday School. I have had a successful variety of careers

in radio, marketing, public relations, and teaching. My first love has always been with teaching. I have chosen to return to this first love. I understand what it is like to struggle and I feel strongly that I have the ability to understand and help others so that their journey will not be as painful and difficult as mine was because of a poor start."

Marion reflected, "You know, play is basically communication, too. Maybe if we teach children to feel that love for literacy as well as for themselves, that would release an internal drive to move ahead, to gain more knowledge and to come to know themselves better. I think that as long as you can play with literacy, you don't have to leave yourself out of it. It's more like it's part of you then."

Jocelyn agreed, "I think it is important to remember that while books are the imaginary worlds of others, they are also interpreted by the reader according to his or her world. So that when I re-read books that I read as a child, the I who returns there, is changed. My reaction to and understanding of what I read is different. As a teenager I read voraciously, mostly escapist literature. Agatha Christie, John Buchan and Rider Haggard. Not long ago I re-read 'Greenmantle', which had been a favourite of mine. I had real trouble with the outdated dialogue, and comments which are so racist by today's standards. I really couldn't

recommend this book to a teenager today. But I remembered none of these things from when I read the book years ago. I remembered it only as a great romantic adventure story."

I spoke up again, asking, "Do people have a way of choosing what they need for the world they are creating for themselves? You keep what you want to keep and you just let go of the parts you don't want?

Elizabeth smiled at me here, and took up the thread of my question. She said, "I think readers take what meaning they can from the reading they do. It says just as much about the person as it does about what they are reading."

Jocelyn observed, "You seem to be talking about literacy as an open process. But how do we relate this to discussing books with children? After the first few years in school, when I read novels, I seem to remember that there was only one interpretation that was correct. In the academic system in which I was educated, I knew that my opinion counted for little, and so I tried to give the teachers what they wanted. It really had little to do with my reaction to a book. I just tried to remember the 'right' answers. We didn't expect to enjoy reading assigned books. But the novels we studied made me aware that there is a body of literature out there of which I would not otherwise have been aware.

The school English curriculum may not have encouraged us to read as teenagers, but thank goodness for the weekly

poetry lessons, where we were read to. These classes, I loved. There was discussion of the meaning, and of understanding the poetry. If there was any technical discussion I slept through it. I certainly don't remember any."

I found myself wondering about the importance of positive experiences with literacy, and Allan spoke up here and put into words the question I was feeling. He said, "How do we do as Marion suggests, and teach children to feel that love? For Crystal and me, that was missed. Is it even possible to teach that love in a classroom? Isn't that love there if the children have had a background of good experiences since they were tiny? Usually? But what if they haven't had those experiences at home? How can we give them five years worth of that background experience?"

Marion responded, "I don't know if we can make up for what they didn't have, but we give them what we can. I think we do it by just going with them into stories and books, over and over, and at the same time loving them as well as their beginning literacy, and the literature. When children are young, what do they want most? To be with us. Adults, as parents and teachers, are very powerful people in their lives."

"So the love, the sharing, and the words, shape us? You mean the stories I will read to my grade one class will have that big an impact on who those children become, as

well as how they become who they are?" I found this discussion so powerful that I knew it would take me some time to come to terms with the ideas. I was so glad that I had decided to take part in this conversation. It was one of those conversations that I knew would make real difference to me.

Crystal commented, "It's like that environment and those relationships stay with you all your life."

A woman with intense blue eyes and curly brown hair, who had been silent so far, started to talk. "I haven't spoken up yet, but now I'd like to say something. My name is Skylar. I've been a teacher for several years, and I have two sons. One is just in his first year of Computer Science at the University of Alberta, and the other is just starting Grade One. I haven't talked yet because I've really been paying attention. I've been listening to the rest of you as hard as I can. Something I've noticed is, Allan in your opening comments, you asked about the connection between how we feel and what we know. I'd just like to say that of all the people who have talked so far, no one had said anything like, 'The day I learned to use periods was the best day of my life.' Or, 'I could control my small motor muscles well enough to print evenly.' But everyone is talking about how they felt, and what caused those feelings."

Allan interjected, "Yes, whatever was good or bad has

stayed with us."

Elizabeth agreed, "I agree. I think the words and the feelings stay with us. The stories and poems and the laughter and all of it, is both what and how we do it. I asked my sons what they remembered about early literacy experiences, and they both recalled Richard Scarry's "Best Word Book Ever" as a book read with an adult and independently. My older son has bought the book for his son, who is seventeen months old, and who is reported to love it. The older son remembered The Cat in the Hat by Dr. Suess, as well as William Blake's poem from the Songs of Innocence, the one that starts out 'piping down the valleys wild...'. My younger son recalled listening to poetry, particularly 'Father Fell into the Pond' and 'Ducks Ditty', and he says that twenty years later he can still 'see' the illustrations that were in the book. He also said he could remember the books I read to the class when he was in grades four and five, especially Laura Ingalls Wilder's books, and 'I am David', by Ann Hohn and 'The Silver Sword', by Ian Sevaillern.

All three of my children remembered poetry and rhymes in their early years. My husband and I both enjoyed reading rhymes to them and doing finger plays such as :"Here is the church, here are the people...." Grade two students enjoy the finger plays also, although some would consider themselves to be too old. At that level they want to read

for themselves, and they love joke books, etc. More play. I remember poetry as a pleasure when I was a small child, too. Both of my parents recited and read poetry - for no reason other than that they liked it. One poem my father recited about "Poor Little Joe, out in the snow, nowhere to shelter, and nowhere to go," was sad but I can remember asking him to say it. Perhaps there were times when I liked to feel sad. At an older age, about nine or ten, I remember learning "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" at school, and the class acting it out as we said it. Also in that class, I enjoyed learning psalms, collects, and the creed by heart. I can't remember ever feeling that it was drudgery. I think that the beauty and rhythm of the words must have really appealed to me. I remember singing a setting of Christina Rosetti's 'Who Has Seen the Wind?' The teacher must have been a very vital, creative person, I think, or her personality appealed to me, because I remember quite a lot of things that happened in her class. It was that year that I wrote a play about the Saxons and Normans, and decided that my brother's name should be spelled 'Harald' instead of 'Harold'. I remember telling my parents that."

Crystal grinned at her and said, "Writing as far as I was concerned, was copying off the board. Not too interesting."

Elizabeth nodded in sympathy, and replied, "Our classes were not boring. I think the magic was in the teacher, and

in the way she saw us. It seemed like the classroom was always full of possibilities."

At this point in the discussion, Allan suggested it was time for lunch. We casually split into groups of two or three and wandered off. When we returned, a young woman with long brown hair, lovely soft skin, and an even softer voice, spoke up. Despite the fact that she too was a beginning teacher, even more of a beginner than I, because she had not had a classroom of her own at all, Sarah was to provide some of the most valuable insights of the day.

She began by saying, "I'm Sarah. I haven't had a classroom of my own yet, and I don't have any children of my own either. So far I haven't said anything, but I can relate to many of the positive experiences Marion, Elizabeth, and Jocelyn have described. I can't quite remember how old I was when I first realized I could read. My mom used to read me stories every night from a big blue book that had fabulous stories and poems in it. One night mom wasn't home to read to me. For some reason I didn't even think of asking dad to read to me. I opened the big blue book to see if I could read myself a story. I was really surprised when I could do it. I don't know why I was so surprised because I'd already been reading at school, but somehow this was different. The stories at school didn't really interest me, but the ones my mom read to me did. After that, even though I knew I could read the stories

myself, I still always asked my mom to read them. She had such great expression that it was easy to visualize the story in my mind."

Sarah continued, "But I can relate to Allan's story as well. As a teenager I hated reading aloud in front of the class. In grades one to six I loved reading aloud and being the centre of attention, but as soon as I got to grade seven that changed. When the teacher said each student in the class was going to read aloud my heart raced and I got butterflies in my stomach. Up until one particular day I had managed to escape reading aloud. The teacher picked students randomly and then, when I heard my name called I could hardly breathe. I started to read, but because I was so nervous I couldn't get all the words out. The teacher thought I was having problems because the words were too difficult so she tried to help me sound them out. Her 'help' only prolonged my agony of being the centre of attention. I could feel the other students staring at me. Finally, the teacher went on to someone else. I don't know if the teacher ever realized that I was a good reader and I was just nervous. This is really the only negative literacy experience I can remember. I think my nervousness was a result of my low self-esteem and insecurity at the time, the normal things you go through as a teenager.

So, for me, literacy seemed to change at each stage of life. When I was in elementary school, reading was fun. I

was good at it and enjoyed it. When I got to junior high I read only to answer questions or study for a test. The enjoyment had gone out of it. The same with writing. I was writing to satisfy the teacher, not myself. In high school I felt much the same way except my goal was to get good enough marks to go to college. I still tried to satisfy the teacher, but put more effort into doing it. In high school I worked really hard even though my marks didn't show it. It wasn't until college and university that I began to read to get through the courses, but also for myself. I began to read and write to accomplish my own goals, not someone else's. I realized that what I read became a part of me and that my writing was also a part of me. Throughout college and university I've made quite good marks. I think the reason is that the purposes I read and write for now are my own. I still try and satisfy the teacher, but somehow it seems different now. I know the courses I'm taking will help me be a better teacher. I am able to explore my own views and issues that are important to me. I see literacy as something special, now.

I think literature really helped me to understand myself, and like Jocelyn and Elizabeth said, it is really part of me, of who I am. My favourite story from childhood was 'Master of All Masters'. I think I liked it because it was so different from other stories I'd heard and read. I enjoyed the sounds of the words. I can remember imagining

what the housekeeper looked like and the man who hired her. I imagined the man's gruff voice as he spoke to the young girl. My mom had vivid expression in her voice when she read me this story. When my friends would come over, she would also read it to them.

When Allan spoke of his treasured comic books, I immediately thought of 'Master of all Masters'. When we were on our lunch break I went through the publishers displays in the hall way and guess what! I just happened to find it in a collection of folk tales. I brought it with me. May I share it?"

We were all willing to have her read to us, and she was obviously very eager to share this important part of her past. At first, when she mentioned the title I didn't recall the story. Sarah began, "This story is called Master of all Masters, and it's from Joseph Jacobs' English Fairy tales, published in 1907." But after hearing the first few lines several of us shared a grin of recognition. It turned out to be a story most of us remembered from our childhood.

Sarah read, "A girl once went to the fair to hire herself for servant. At last a funny-looking man engaged her, and took her home to his house. When she got there, he told her that he had something to teach her, for that in his house he had his own names for things. He said to her, "What will you call me?"

"Master, or mister, or whatever you please, sir", she answered.

He said, "You must call me 'Master of all masters.' And what would you call this?", pointing to his bed.

"Bed or couch, or whatever you please, sir."

"No, that's my 'barnacle.' And what do you call these?" said he, pointing to his pantaloons.

"Breeches or trousers, or whatever you please, sir."

"You must call them 'squibs and crackers.' And what would you call her?", pointing to the cat.

"Cat or kit, or whatever you please sir."

"You must call her 'white-faced simminy.' And this now, showing the fire, "what would you call this?"

"Fire or flame sir, or whatever you please, sir."

"You must call it 'hot cockalorum,' and what is this?" he went on, pointing to the water.

"Water or wet, or whatever you please, sir."

"No, 'pondalorum' is its name. And what do you call all this?" asked he as he pointed to the house.

"House or cottage, or whatever you please sir."

"You must call it 'high topper mountain.'"

That very night the servant woke her master up in a fright, and said: "Master of all masters, get out of your barnacle and put on your squibs and crackers. For white-faced simminy has gone a spark of hot cockalorum on its tail, and unless you get some pondalorum, high

topper mountain will be all on hot cockalorum."

Skylar smiled, and said, "I remember that one. I used to love it too."

Sarah went on, "When I was taking a class last year, I went to the education library and found a copy of the story. I was so excited to find it and read it again after so many years. It must have taken the librarians half an hour to help me find it, but when I read it again I felt somewhat disappointed. I liked it, but I didn't feel the excitement when I read it as I had felt as a child. I think the reason is that when I was a child my mom usually read it to me. Her expression and the way she pronounced the words made the story come to life for me. When I read it to myself silently in the library, it was just another story. I shouldn't say it was just another story because it was and it is still special to me because it's my treasure. But later, when I read it aloud to myself, I felt this special feeling or magic that I experienced each time my mom read it when I was a kid. It was a great social experience, and it really affected my attitude and my learning. What I wonder, is this. Is that magic how children see letters and the sounds of words?"

Allan shook his head. "I don't understand what you mean."

Sarah explained, "Like Jocelyn was describing the

buttons she played with. You know, creating a world from nothing. Anything can be anything you want it to be in play. Maybe that's why 'Master of All Masters' was so fascinating to my friends and me. In that story, we saw how words and meanings can shift and change. It's like that story showed me the way language works. The power you can have if you can read, talk, write, use language in any way. I mean, language can always shift and change, but it is also partly stable at the same time. It's not just completely open. Like Jocelyn said, you make the world and it changes you, but it's not just of your own making. It's choosing from what is around you, and doing what you can within that, as well."

Allan's eyes brightened. "You mean it's like the way I see math? Everything is connected?"

Marion nodded, and contributed, "Jocelyn mentioned that reading is an open process. I guess it's not just open, but it's closed too. It's not just one or the other, but both one and the other. But the child has to be able to be in the process of 'I see myself as...', which is play, and then identify with the significant adults in his life. Literacy can help us to do that."

Elizabeth iterated, "It's that special identification with the people we love, but it's more than that too. It's inner structures, the patterns of the language itself. I think there is a relationship, an energy, that is created

between the auditory and the verbal patterning. That's how the two come together."

"It's the patterns that help us to make sense. A story like 'Master of all Masters' kind of shows us how we do it. I mean, how we can create meaning. It's easy to see what is changed because of what is not changed", I suggested.

Allan replied, "Yah. I see the patterns like that in math. There's the background and there's the foreground. Meaning isn't just flat. It has texture. I don't naturally and easily see the patterns in language. Once you can see a pattern, you get the meaning. It's like it explodes all of a sudden, you see the pattern and you see all the possible connections, and you can even see where the pattern modifies, or breaks up into other patterns. The patterns work from the simplest counting right up to senior calculus. In math, I do everything in my head. My head is great. The numbers speak right to me."

I responded, "In literature, it's like that for me. Is it because language is patterns that it is so important for children to hear a lot of stories? To participate in a lot of language? And it's because literature is patterns that's so important for children? They can explore and experiment the patterns so easily and naturally, through literature? Some of us here had a great deal of that kind of experience and our progress in reading and writing was affected by that?"

Elizabeth agreed, "I think so, and in playfulness, children usually go over and over the same patterns until they are ready to leave them behind. But it's not just grammatical patterns. It's more than that. For example, my son also often talks about a story told by his Grade Two teacher. It was a fairy story illustrated by the parts of a bleeding heart flower. In fact, this year, at age twenty seven, he planted a bleeding heart in his garden because of the memory."

Marion smiled, "Yes, because the patterns come from inside. Both the patterns of language, so you know what goes with what, and you know so much without even having to think about it, like how word families are spelled. Once you see the pattern you know. But there is also the patterns of personal response, the social and moral and emotional levels."

Allan asked, "You mean like planting a bleeding heart because the idea was given to you through a story?"

Marion held up a piece of clean loose leaf paper. "Yes, the idea, but more than the idea. Saying it that way makes it too simple. It's not just the idea, but it's the sense, the sensibility (remember Jane Austen?) It's the sensibility that comes from the inside as well. Look at this sheet," she said. Before it's written on, it's so fresh, so clean, so unused, brand new. When I first look at a page like this, I see beauty in it, but I also see

possibilities, the numerous potentials which can be created on this piece of virgin paper. Only then will this paper have meaning to me, because through the coming together of these symbols, meaning is created. A clean piece of paper is meaningless, there are so many others exactly like it, clean, fresh, waiting. Once I have written on it, it will be filled with meaning. It will be unique. There is no other page exactly like it anywhere. I see beauty. What do you see, Allan?"

Allan groaned, "To be honest with you, I see my whole personal history of struggle and trying to overcome my feelings of failure in the past."

Marion was intense. She leaned forward and spaced her words carefully, "Yes, so do I. To me, this piece of paper is a safe place to explore and to have fun. It is all my feelings about myself, Marion as a good person, my hope for the future, my past, and all the rest."

Crystal interrupted here, and said, "The story Sarah just read to us is really fun isn't it? Why is it that there was no fun for me in reading and writing at school?"

I inquired, "Was it partly because reading and writing was too mechanical? You weren't there as a person? You were just trying to learn the rules or something?" I silently thought of the quiet rows of children in my Grade Three/Four classroom.

For a few moments no one spoke. Then Jocelyn

commented, "I like the story Sarah read too. I remember it from my childhood as well. I think I like it because it's like a puzzle. It's complex. Because of the complexity it's really interesting and you find yourself really thinking about it. It goes way beyond the kind of thinking and involvement you feel if you're just supposed to fill in the blanks on a worksheet or something like that. I takes you way beyond the mechanical."

Sarah responded, "Yes. That's probably why I liked it. It was different and there was lots to think about. You can get really involved in this kind of a story, and you keep coming back to your thoughts over and over again."

I added, "A lot of the time in our society, we seem to treat literacy as if it is just a mechanical thing, and therefore very predictable and so on. And we say we know when someone is literate by the score they make on a test, for example, or if they can read and write well enough to fill in a government form."

Sarah agreed, "I think that is the traditional view. That literacy can be measured that way, and that is valid. But I think a person knows if he/she is illiterate if print just looks like a whole jumble of letters. If a person can read print, but cannot construct meaning from it then I think he/she is illiterate. A person who cannot put letters of the alphabet together to construct words and create meaningful sentences, to me is illiterate."

"So you're saying that literacy is definitely more than skills?", Allan confirmed.

Sarah responded, "Yes. I think it's a combination of skills that together help a person toward meaning. But it's using various combinations in different contexts too. That's the complexity and unpredictability again."

"So literacy is meaning in a variety of situations, which makes the individual more flexible, more adaptable, in his or her world," Allan suggested.

Sarah assented, "Yes, and the flexibility and adaptability is how literacy is playful. In literacy we are experimenting with writing down our ideas, how the words connect, and does it make sense. In reading we explore others' ideas. The reader enjoys being taken to another world if the book is a fantasy, or learning more about a certain subject he or she does not understand. When I think of what playful means, I think 'fun'. Some literacy activities may not be regarded as fun if you are doing them for someone else instead of yourself. Literacy is talking, too. Articulation. You can know something, but when you can actually talk about it, that moves you forward.

Literacy is also playful because it is always changing. You may read the book over and over again, but each time you get more and more from it."

Allan mused, "It was young children who taught me that reading a story once is not enough."

Sarah nodded, and replied, "On the other hand, a person may want to read many different books, and only once each. When kids play they are always learning, but in a different way. What I mean is that even though it may look like children are playing the same game or making believe in a story they did last time, they really aren't. It's changed, as they learned from playing it previously. Literacy is much the same. Continually reading and writing changes us as individuals.

I think literacy is playful because you can do so many things with it. It's so versatile. A person can read a book, the graffiti in the bathroom, or the road signs, depending on the reason for reading. If your purpose is to gain information you may read a book, but if you don't mind being disgusted you may read the graffiti on the wall."

I wondered, "What you're saying makes a lot of sense to me. But, what does that mean for me as a teacher in a classroom?"

Sarah answered, "A lot of it has to do with patterns, I think. When you see a pattern it's exciting. Then you look for more patterns. The finding and exploring bring you to a better feeling about yourself. I think play and literacy are definitely related. Children are expanding their knowledge as they play."

Elizabeth affirmed this, commenting, "In play, children may use a word that someone has read to them from a book, or

they may have heard an adult use. The children are experimenting with one another. The children can use new words in different contexts. They can test their knowledge of syntax. Play is a non-threatening situation. If one child says something to another and he/she doesn't understand, that child knows the sentence must be changed. He may try the sentence a few different ways. He doesn't feel threatened by his mistakes because there is no one to put a red X on it. In a playing situation the children's learning is their own. There is no parent or teacher correcting them or taking over their learning. Instead they are able to explore on their own, in the infinity of possible connections."

Sarah offered, "Yes, and I think that the ideas children get from play may be the motivation for their own writing and story telling. In play kids experiment with language, and language is the basis for reading and writing. Children learn that the purpose for language is to communicate and therefore requires them to construct complex meaning. Why should reading and writing, as aspects of langauge, be any different?"

Marion contributed, "The conventional view of literacy is that it is basically rules to be followed. But literacy also involves processes, or strategies. It's not just rules, it's knowing when a rule is needed or not. Literacy is like an iceberg. Only a little bit sticks out at the

top. There's more underneath. There's always something more than we can describe. It's always changing. The whole basis of our society is language. And literacy involves the playful manipulation of the skills and rules. You need to get to the place where you can feel relaxed and you can manipulate the parts of the whole, and feel like you're in control of it."

Crystal asked, "That's what you mean by seeing patterns?"

I had a question I couldn't neglect any longer. I asked, "Speaking of complex puzzles, I have one that I need help with."

All eyes turned toward me. "I want to talk about how to set up my classroom, keeping in mind the ideas we've shared. I'm going in there in a few days to begin to prepare for the children to come. Where do I start? I don't even know how to begin. What is important?"

Elizabeth was quick to respond. She said, "You know about having a classroom library, and that it's important to have a variety of books available? You know the children need you to spend time every day reading aloud to them? And you know about letting them read and write every day?

I nodded. Marion was next to contribute. She said, "And you know that as a class you need to develop a shared language space, a language place, through favourite stories and poems and so on? You know that you need to bring the

children through the reading and writing process in a way that leaves the child at the centre, so you don't take the real effort and responsibility away from the child?

Again I nodded, but said, "But how to do it? How will my classroom look? I know how it should feel to me. But how do I make it so children can create what they need? I know that the arrangement of the physical space is just as important as the mental and emotional space or any other aspect of the classroom, because that will have a lot to do with how the children interact with each other and with me...it will have a lot to do with the world they create."

We sat silent for a few moments. I wished that I could tell them about the gardener, and about the enfolded layers of scenes borrowed from one setting and brought into another, and how he had also talked to me about the deep inner need for humans to reach beyond themselves. But what I said was, "I don't want the environment to carry old messages about school and learning, the roles of children and teachers, that raise old expectations and block a more authentic kind of responding, thinking, and doing. What do I do?"

Allan asked, "How do you know how it should feel?"

I responded, "Because of my own memories, and what we have talked about here today so far has affirmed what I already knew. I didn't know how to say the things that have been said here today. In my own classroom in May and June,

I just felt so much confusion, and even though the children were sitting there in straight rows and doing what I told them to do, I just felt it wasn't right. It looked like they were learning, but I know most of them really weren't. Like many of you, I had good experiences with literacy in my own family. They came mostly through my grandmother. School was a different story though, and I don't want to perpetuate the negative aspects of schooling as I experienced it. However, I do not really know if I can create something better. Maybe I'm a little bit afraid of making mistakes because change is always scary. Like Crystal described, I moved outside of what was happening at school. Mentally and emotionally I sort of moved outside. Very little of what happened in school seemed to be connected to me. This conversation today is a far better learning experience, because it has been sharing ideas with others."

Elizabeth spoke up here, and asked, "What do you mean by 'old messages'?"

I replied, "I mean that as soon as any of us walks into an elementary school and we smell the cleaning compound that the caretakers use on the floor, and we come into a classroom and see the desks lined up and the textbooks on the shelves, we are caught right away into a whole pattern of seeing, thinking, doing, and being that is based in our past. Some of the memories are good ones. But the physical

atmosphere itself triggers a lot of other kinds of memories, and these are an overwhelming inertia in itself. And you start thinking and acting from those school memories from your own past, and even while you're passing out the textbooks and thinking, 'This is just a place to start', you are stifling the purposes of literacy right there and before you know it, every day you walk in you just pass out those same textbooks because it's too much effort to change. I don't think you can compromise. I don't think it works to change one little thing at a time. I mean that for the children to have a different kind of experience, the experience has to be different. There is an older, more important message from memories, like being in my Grandmother's kitchen, behind the messages hidded in the school memories. The one obscures the other. I find myself acting as though I believe education should basically be a mechanical process, and I don't know how to clear away the debris of how I was taught myself, and that was mostly according to the industrial model of education. It's like I'm trapped mentally in that flat land that Allan mentioned, where there is no texture and no sense of being alive, and where everyone is expected to be the same."

Elizabeth leaned back in her chair and said, "Ah. Well, what are the signs of the factory model of education? School buildings that all look the same from the outside, and the inside too. There are cookie cutter desks and text

books all the same. A standardized curriculum that every teacher is mandated to follow. System-wide tests that are administered to all students at the same time. You mean that these carry the message that there is no room for individuality, and no room for the needs and abilities of the child to really be the centre of the process?"

I nodded, "Yes. And all the assumptions that go along with those physical trademarks. The idea that everyone needs to know all the same things, and that anyone, even a teacher can decide what someone else needs to know. And even if the teacher, or anyone else really could have this kind of access to another person's mind, there is also the assumption that they should predigest the information and organize it and give it to you afterward in the form of workbooks, board work, or worksheets. That the child is not capable of handling complexity. Those ideas that subtly imply that information and knowledge are the same thing, those assumptions that deny the really important things, like that every human culture has ways of expressing abstract and ritualized knowledge, and that there is an inner drive to symbolize and so on. And yet we don't see kids in classrooms expressing their search for who they are. We don't see them expressing that authentic need for reaching beyond themselves the way human beings have since time immemorial. The cave drawings, and the fairy tales and the folk tales and the great works of classic literature.

And the comic books, and all the other genres of literature through which we have expressed our being. Instead we either see children who are not involved in their own education, but are satisfied with something that looks a certain way on the outside. Because we have taught them to be like that, not because they're not capable of something more. And if you ask the kids, often they will say that their school work is just done to please someone else, like Sarah said. It's not really real. I don't want that to happen in my classroom. I want children to really learn, not just be parrots."

Marion looked uncertain. She queried, "Are you sure we can really do that in schools? Maybe what you're talking about can't be done in classrooms."

Jocelyn responded, "It's the difference between thinking of knowledge as a thing, or knowledge as a journey. As a thing, knowledge would be an absolute. It's sort of like searching for 'The Answer.' There isn't one, although to state that might imply an end to the search, and that in itself might be dangerous. Perhaps it comes with tolerance that what you are doing is not searching for THE answer, but rather exploring the possibilities of different answers provided by different people and peoples and their recorded experiences. Although there are times when I envy those who have arrived at their answers, it's not for me. Not yet, at least. Absolutes frighten me with their zero tolerance.

But in a way I envy their certainty and safety. The point is that we negotiate our understanding of the world, through both play and literacy. We explore the world, and we bring ourselves into being in the world at the same time. It is the process that is the important part, not the development of lists of subskills, but we have missed that because of our focus on the skills. They can be pinned down. Objectified. It is much harder to verify a process."

I was still worried. I said, "I know that it may be impossible to provide the optimum literacy environment for every child in my classroom all the time. But what I want to do, at least, is to remove some of the worst impediments. As much as possible I want to create an open space that is safe and supportive, where children can meet their own needs for self-expression. What they do with the opportunity is their responsibility. My responsibility is to not hinder them, at the very least. Do you see what I mean?"

Elizabeth smiled at me and offered, "Maybe the best way for me to help is to tell you how I do it? Would it be of any help if I told you about how I do it?"

Allan said, "That makes sense. OK. How do you do it, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth answered, "Well for one thing, I always think that in the classroom there should be a feeling of physical freedom. But not anarchy. Anarchy distresses children."

Marion assented, and said, "And you want opportunities

for social interaction, but learning at the same time, because you're still responsible for the curriculum requirements being met."

Crystal pointed out, "But those two ideas seem to conflict. What I want to know is how do you live in the classroom when the tensions, and the expectations of the system create conflicts and wear you out. It's all very well to believe that literacy is a personal process that we engage in as long as we live, but what about the practical problem of being required to hand in a time table that slots the time you spend on certain subjects, and to hell with what any individual child might need on a particular day at a particular time?"

Elizabeth offered, "When I begin I go into the classroom early. At least a week before school begins. I think about how many children will be coming, what materials I have on hand, what I might need, what furniture I have in the classroom, and of that what can be moved and what can't. I cut out bits of paper, furniture cutouts, and I play with them. I move the furniture about and imagine the pathways. How will the children get from one space in the classroom to another. What do I need that I don't have and how can it be scrounged? I make lists of things I need. I figure out what can parents provide, and what I can look for at garage sales. I like to have big glass jars to organize all these things, like corks, pine cones, beads, scraps of fabric,

yarn, string, and the various materials that the children can use to make their projects throughout the year. Once I have that done, it's time to take a break. I go to visit other classrooms in the school and talk with the teachers. Then later that first day I start to move the furniture into place, and I forage through old store rooms and cupboards to see what I can find. I spread everything out on the floor to see what's there, and to visualize how it will fit into the space I have available."

Sarah asked, "What do you do the second day?" Elizabeth continued what she had begun. She said, "The second day I go in I probably finish moving the furniture around and putting all the materials where they can be of most use. I need to figure out how the arrangements will actually work for the children. I need to work out what the flow of traffic will be like, and what points are likely to have too many children at one time, or what spaces are likely to be less busy. I ask myself if I have enough upright boundaries in the room to create private spaces as well as public spaces. Where do I want to have displays set up? Where will I have the story time area and the class library. There should be a carpeted area large enough for all the children to sit down and listen to stories. And I like to have a bookshelf right there for the collection of favourite books."

Skylar interjected, "And I want to have books at all

the other areas too. These should be fiction and non-fiction, picture books, and all kinds of story books. And allow for reading that can be done not just in books. Things like hockey cards too. My son's school has banned hockey cards at school, and that is a disaster for him because so far his most exciting reading has been done via those cards and the group of boys he trades with."

Elizabeth nodded, and said, "Yes. You need space for the children to bring things like hockey cards and baseball cards, and collections of comics, and rocks or whatever. So the classroom belongs to the children."

Crystal mused, "So, it really takes several days to get these things all set up, and then you can start doing some planning for instruction. I concentrate on activities that will help the children to get to know each other, to start with. You have to set the tone for social interactions. That the classroom is a safe place for everybody."

Sarah offered, "And I would need to organize myself too. I would find books on the themes I know I want to start out with, and make lists of materials that I have on hand, and other lists of materials I would need to ask for from parents. I like to organize my plan book so I have blank lists of the children's names so I can more easily keep track of money that is brought for field trips and so on, and addresses and phone numbers so they're handy when I need them. All those little things need to be done before

the children come, and they all take time."

Jocelyn added, "And don't forget to talk with the other teachers every day. Just for a while, I need to go to the coffee room or to their classrooms, so we can get in the habit of talking to each other. I need the support system to be there for me, and if the other teachers don't know me they won't be able to support me, and I won't be able to support them if they need it either."

Allan spoke up, saying, "This is when I decide what kinds of activities I want for the first few days of school. I change them after I get to know the children a little, if I have to. I figure out how many centres to have. I usually want a math centre, a writing centre, a science centre, an art centre and so on. I usually like to group the desks in fours or something, rather than rows."

Elizabeth affirmed, "Once the room is set up, the first thing I do when the children come is to start teaching them rhymes and poems. Like 'open them, shut them, give a little clap, open them, shut them, put them in your lap'. I have as many classroom routines as possible linked to these little poems. I usually teach a new rhyme or poem every day or so and keep reviewing the ones they already know as we go along. Then they can start reading from these, because you can write them out on wall charts and make up little booklets with them, and the children can dramatize them as well. It's not long before they have an impressive

repertoire. I always like to start the year with lots of work on the nursery rhymes and fairy tales because these are usually familiar to most of the children already, so you can begin connecting to what they already know. When they act out stories they know from memory and then bring print to that, print is not only meaningful and personal. It is physical as well. For the children to feel secure it's really important that they begin to realize that they do know a lot, just from living. Even the ones whose parents haven't spent time reading to them, know more than they think they do just from watching TV and so on. While I am doing this, I am also teaching them to pay attention to the world around them, as well as that they can organize information in a way that is meaningful to them."

Jocelyn pointed out, "It's the attitude. They have to know that print is meaningful and personal. Then they begin to respond and get interested. Environmental print is an important connection to what they already know. I have the children bring cereal boxes and so on. All the things they know how to read from TV. They may not know that recognition of symbols such as these is already reading. I create a kind of 3-D collage of these by stapling them onto a wall or divider by the writing centre to start off with. These are things the children can read, and they may not realize that they are reading. It gives them some confidence to start with."

Sarah commented, "But most of them can read some environmental print, can't they? They do know what labels and so on say, and from this the children will often start to write. I like Jocelyn's idea of making a kind of collage on the wall, then children bring the items to circle time, and pass them around. Something else I would do is go for a walk around the school and the neighbourhood. Take paper and crayons, and when the children see print they can copy it or take a rubbing or something. Then that can go on the wall as part of the collage too. Also, I make a book of things like candy bar wrappers and labels and cereal boxes and so on. I let the children go through magazines and just cut out the advertisements that they recognize. Then this book can be placed at the writing centre. They can copy designs and words from this and then they begin to realize that they can write too."

The session stretched on into the afternoon. Shortly before it was time to break for supper, Crystal spoke up. She commented, "I've learned something from being part of this discussion today. Earlier someone was talking about trust, and Allan mentioned that in this session we would just see what might come out of talking together. I wouldn't have believed we could spend such an interesting day just talking.

Elizabeth assented, saying, "And even though I always knew that literacy was terribly important to me, until today

I didn't really realize how much my literacy is me, my identity and my voice."

Allan reflected, "I think that if my teachers could have seen me as an individual and doing the best I could, in all my efforts to read and write, my experiences in school would have been very different."

"I want to go back to something here," said Elizabeth. "Something I want to explore before we go is our literacy treasures. Sarah shared 'Master of all Masters' with us, and Allan told us about his comic books. Do we all have a piece of literature that was special in some way? It might be fun to talk about these."

Jocelyn pointed out, "Allan mentioned comics. I remember comics too, as a social experience. I haven't thought about those comics for years. They were not acceptable in many households. I read them without adult intervention or involvement. They were mine. That was one reason why my friends and I liked them. We each interpreted them in our own way. There was no right or wrong. I read these comics until I was eight or nine. I suppose they stimulated my imagination and developed my reading skills. But I do remember that my friends and I discussed the comics in a way that we never discussed books. They were more widely read than books for one thing. They were probably easier to read for many, and so more accessible.

I made the transition to adult literature one day when

I was about 12, at home and bored. My father belonged to a book club, and books were sent monthly. These books had their own glass book case of honour. Maybe it was partly the excitement of tasting hidden fruits, when everyone else was away from home. I read 'A Town Called Alice' first. Some of the others were less successful. But through these books I did have a sense of entering the adult world."

Elizabeth said, "A sense of entering the adult world through literature. Yes, I know what you mean. For me it was connecting with the female members of my family, back through several generations. My treasure would be a very thick book, called 'Sylvia's Annual', dating from the 1880's I think, that belonged originally to my great-grandmother, before passing to my grandmother, mother, and myself. It contains coloured fashion plates, home hints, beauty hints, and romantic stories. Perhaps there was a weekly or monthly magazine called, 'Sylvia's'. I was 7 or 8 when I was first allowed to read it and loved to sit and look at the photographic illustrations and especially the fashions that fascinated me. The bustles, fans held by the women, and their hairstyles were so very different from the fashions of my post-war childhood, when clothes were still rationed. I eventually read every story. I haven't read anything from it for years - something else to read when I finally have my degree. Mary, my daughter, gets the book down and reads it. Like me, she is fascinated by the pressed flowers that are

between the pages and has begun to add her contributions. Continuity with the past is very important to me, and Mary has caught the disease. She treasures books that belonged to both of her grandmothers originally and a prayer book that was given to my great aunt in 1890. Perhaps my attachment to the book comes not only from the fact that my female ancestors owned it but also because through it I can make contact with the past, with a very different way of life. The pages of the book are very thin - like air mail paper, and turning them was a careful, delicate process. The fashion plates made me realize how restricted women were. The thought of being corsetted to achieve the wasp waist didn't appeal, but I did think the dresses were elegant and I fancied wearing a long dress with a short train. Romance?"

Jocelyn replied, "For me, entering the adult world through literature also had a down side. I was very eager for adult approval. There was a lot of pressure on me to read "classics", far more than on children today. And so I struggled with Dickens because I was expected to. 'A Christmas Carol' was actually the only one that I enjoyed. I remember once when I was babysitting, I was about twelve years old or so. I had been given Curiosity Shop to read for the evening, and as the adults left, I sat there holding the book. They had showered me with their praise and approval. But after they had gone I worked my way through

their pile of Readers' Digests. It was confusing to me, not being allowed to choose what I read and wanting to please the adults around me. So in that way my connections with the adult world through literature were not altogether smooth.

But, to be fair, I'll tell you about Miss Bailey. In many ways she widened our world through reading and writing. She read from the Bible with more emotion than anyone except the charismatic Christians I have heard as an adult. As well, she read history stories, and stories set at "Punchbowl Farm," which were good. She provided us with pen friends. I corresponded with mine for three years, and actually visited her in Cornwall. Meeting her ended the friendship, but we wrote. She made a big impression in another way as well. Once she started reading a book to us. I can remember being totally lost in the story. A big black man had built a fire on a beach in Scotland and danced wildly about. I could see the fire and hear the flames crackling. And then suddenly she closed the book and told us that we were too young to understand the story. Oh, repressed sexuality! Did I fail to explain that the dancing black man was nearly naked? A few years later, after a long and surreptitious search I finally found the book. It was 'Prester John'. I read it, and guess what? By then there was no sex in it."

Marion smiled, and answered, "I can relate to what you

are saying, about the influence a teacher can be on our transition to a wider world. As a child I always liked being at home best, tucked away in my own little refuge, alone yet never lonely. I had my books, I had my dolls and teddy bears, and I had my mother, my best friend. She was always there, always loving me for who I was on the inside. When I look at myself now, I love people, I have confidence in myself, I have no problems meeting people. But, when I entered my teens I realized that men found me attractive and fun, and this gave me another kind of confidence. I began to believe that I was OK. I was a good person, as my mother had always told me - but aren't mothers supposed to say things like that? I went through some terrible teenage years. I moved in with my boyfriend at the age of seventeen, quit school, and did drugs, and drank, but eventually I got back on track and straightened out my life. I have many people to thank for that, but especially my teacher, Mr. Petroff, at LCY college. He made me believe in myself because he believed in me. He told my parents I was definitely university material, and although I had always planned to go on, I hadn't ever thought past that point. Although my mother was always there, somehow it wasn't enough that she always told me that someday I would make it. I needed an unbiased viewpoint, and that teacher gave me that. Someday I would like to be able to instill that confidence to succeed in another person."

Jocelyn offered, "What Elizabeth said about the connection between generations is something I can relate to, as well. My sons. One was a collector, and the other wasn't. So that one still has his first scribblers, and the other never kept them. But one day when I was going through some of the old books at home, I came across a copy of Black Beauty. That would have to be the literacy treasure of my life. When I bumped into that copy that day, there was a sweet touch. The edition was cheap, and the paper was poor quality, and the binding was coming loose. I opened the book expecting to see my name. But it wasn't my name there, it was my son Nick's. So there was some feeling of the passing from generations, and it was 'warm.' Just for a few minutes there, with the book in my hand, I felt connected to myself in a very deep down way."

Marion suggested, "If we could let children feel that kind of love, then we would be giving them something to take into themselves that they would never lose. How can we do that? It seems like each one of us had some positive way to explore our individuality through literacy, through literature, which connected us with other people, and with the wisdom of the ages, and the universals of human experience. Why have we so often thought that as adults and as teachers we know best what children should read and when? If we read a lot to them, respond to when they say they want to do it again, and trust they are asking for reasons that

matter to them, then the familiarity is good, but still always be bringing something new into the picture."

Allan looked around at our faces, and suggested that on than note we should bring our conversation to an end, at least for that day. He said, "Can we sort some of what has been said today? Has anyone come to anything that seems significant?"

Crystal summed up, saying "First of all, I didn't realize what an individual, as well as emotional issue literacy is. I knew it was for me because of my bad experiences and my feelings of insecurity. What I didn't realize is that it is the same kind of thing for everyone."

Jocelyn reviewed, "I guess that would have to be my most clear impression at the moment, too. I didn't realize how personal literacy is, and how much effect it can have on children. Our literacy and how we feel about ourselves seem to me to be very close to the same thing."

Elizabeth reflected, "What seems to have emerged to be the most significant aspect of our conversation for me is being alert to the connections between play and literacy can help us to see the needs of the learner. This awareness can bring us to clues about the kind of classroom environments we could provide for children. I've known that for a long time, I suppose, but I had never really talked about it before. I had never realized how much those early experiences with reading and writing had affected me."

Sarah offered, "I understand better how everyday expectations, or traditions, can unintentionally create boundaries and barriers for children. I think we need to keep talking about how we can work in classrooms in such a way that we nurture children's literacy and well as their inner selves. There will always be boundaries and traditions and expectations. But which of these are helpful and necessary, and help the learner to continue growing? If I learned anything today, it is that I need to keep asking questions and thinking hard about everything I do in the classroom. If I take much for granted, I may not be doing the best thing for the children in my classroom."

We made plans to get together to carry on our conversations. Our next meeting would be at Allan's school just before Thanksgiving. What had I learned? I knew that I was not alone in wanting to create a supportive classroom that would allow children to learn naturally. But it still remained for me to create the place where this could happen. My mind was aswirl with images, some of which were clear, but others were very vague. Could I create a living literacy place with my students? Would it work?

# PART THREE

## I

As he walked away, he discovered an odd thing;
the Forest, of course, was a distant Forest,
yet he could approach it, even enter it,
without its losing that particular charm.
He had never before been able
to walk into the distance
without turning it into mere
surroundings.

It really added a considerable attraction
to walking in the country, because,
as you walked, new distances opened out;
so that you now had double, treble,
and quadruple distances...

You could go on and on, and
have a whole country in a garden...
You could go on and
on...
(Tolkein, 1964. p. 89)

"What did you do then? After the conference, I mean. Were you excited?" Chandre's voice pulled me back into the classroom with a jolt. I had been so absorbed with my memories, that I had forgotten she was there...

Excited? Yes, I was excited to find people with whom I could share ideas and problems. Some of us did meet that next Thanksgiving. And several times a year after that too. Not all of us. By that September, Sarah and Marion had gone into the far north and I never saw them again, unfortunately. The next year Allan went to work in the

school division in which he had grown up, and I didn't see him again either. I lost touch with Crystal and Skylar too. I don't know what became of them. But I talked to Elizabeth and Jocelyn regularly on the phone, and I visited their classrooms as well. We still write to each other.

Anyway, when the conference ended, I left the hotel and headed down the valley toward one of my favourite spots, where the highway crossed Snaring River. It was quiet down by the bridge. Silver light spilled along the river bank, the water running dark blue and swift over the rocks. I sat down on a flat topped rock, putting my coat on and a car blanket under me, for even though it was a summer evening, I knew the air would cool off quickly once the sun began to go down. I wanted time to be quiet, to think, to come to terms with what had been discussed at the conference.

I knew that the changes I had begun to make would allow for a warmer, more lively classroom atmosphere. I hoped this would be more satisfying for both myself and the children. The focus would be on relationships, and on allowing each child being allowed to awaken to his or her own questions and pursuits. The rehearsal of lists of skills would no longer be the dominant activity. For me, teaching would not be telling children what to do for their own good, but rather listening carefully to them as they expressed their needs, so that I would more easily enter their world and be with them there, as needed.

I would assume that to want to learn, and to become literate were natural to the human being, given the right setting. I would act as though the children would know what they needed, and would constantly be making efforts toward that. In my relationships with the children I would try to listen, and to pay attention.

I would trust to the magic of literature, as the collected voice of human experience, to awaken the children's responses, and pull them in to their own search for themselves.

My conversations at the conference had affirmed to me that those first steps I had made at the end of June had been appropriate, when I had packed away the workbooks and old readers, and had filled the shelves with paper, crayons, and other materials that the children could actually use. Gradually the buzz of ideas inside my mind began to subside. I began to allow my mind to wander along the river bank, and I slowly allowed my thoughts to be absorbed into the lively chatter of the river. When darkness fell, I turned my car back toward home.

I followed the advice Elizabeth and others had given me at the conference, and had gone into the classroom in August and organized the space. When the children arrived in September, I was ready for them. I had arranged the room with desks in groups of three or four at the side of the room, taking up as little of the floor as possible. I had

tables and dividers arranged, with activities set out for the first days of class.

I had also followed Elizabeth's advice in that there were books in every part of the room, at the writing centre, the math area, the art area, and so on. There was a variety of books, including those for emerging literacy, pattern books, nursery rhymes and fairy tales, non-fiction, and picture books.

I stressed to the children that the classroom had to be a safe place for all, emotionally and physically, and that there was only one rule. That was to show kindness to each other. During the first few weeks of school the focus was on the classroom as a social space. We played little games that required the children to use each others' names. Simple games. Silly games, like standing in a circle and throwing a ball to each other, calling out our names each time you caught or threw.

To help the children think of themselves in relation to others, we talked a lot about families. Nuclear families, extended families, and animal families. We talked about how people are the same, and how they may be different, and we talked about the acceptance of differences. We discussed names, addresses, likes, and dislikes, all in the effort toward building a feeling of community. It was essential that the children begin to feel that they knew each other and could help each other.

I put all the names and phone numbers on chart paper, and we made phone books. This gave the children practise in matching letters and in copying.

The children were asked to bring a photograph from home, which we put on a bulletin board, with all the names. As much as possible, we did everything in groups to give the children a sense of common identity, that we're together. We would eat snacks together, and work together, as well as have fun together. I wanted to keep emphasis on a sense of responsibility for one another, which would set the tone for the atmosphere of the classroom.

I found that for me, the demands of the teaching day were still overwhelming, but now the children were involved in their own growing, and in a rewarding play of being in which I saw their actions and heard their words as part of the creation of their place, their personal, but shared, world. Although this classroom appeared to be more chaotic than my first one had been, because the children moved and talked to each other more, I was confident that the children were creating order within, and that this chaos had a form of it's own. The form itself was that of continually fluid, emerging order, rather than order imposed.

II

While with an eye
made quiet
by the power of Harmony,
and the deep power of joy
We see into things.
(Wordsworth, 1778, line 47)

Every morning would start with a quiet reading time for the first half hour. This was a time when everyone would use a book of his or her choice. Quiet reading time was followed by a story time, in which I would routinely introduce at least one new book, story, or poem each day, and I would also read at least one familiar one, so that the stock of favourites and the shared language of the classroom could begin to build. I planned to spend several weeks at least, at the beginning of the year, immersing the children in nursery rhymes, nonsense poems, folk tales, fairy tales, books written with a rhythmic, obviously repetitive (and therefore highly predictable) text, as well as books chosen just because they were beautifully written and illustrated. It was so important that these stories be revisited over and over. In the language, they could wash their minds and bodies with sounds and thoughts. They could learn to dance and swim like minnows in the print and in the ideas. I would look for ways to help them to sustain the flow, always following the sparkle in their eyes, the centre of the 'I', and trying to allow them to create gardens, to have growing space, in the classroom.

Early in September, I sent a note home to parents about how to choose books with their children. I also invited the children to bring a favourite book from home to share with the class. Another important topic to communicate with parents about was the nature of beginning reading and writing. Parents need to know what the normal writing of a young child looks like, otherwise they may expect their child to practise printing well formed alphabet letters that march evenly across worksheets, and not value the exploratory work that is so necessary. Parents may need to be cautioned not to over correct their children's attempts to write, as children need to be encouraged to explore writing as a medium.

This information was sent home in a newsletter, and was also shared at PJ night. PJ night was a time when the children were invited to come to school in their pyjamas after supper one night in late September, bringing their parents along. At PJ night, I described the importance of parents reading aloud to their children. I also talked to them about the importance of allowing children to explore favourite books over and over again, and explained that children ask for repetition as long as they are still working out their understanding of the story.

Each child had brought one favourite book and one stuffed animal with them. They sat beside their parents in a circle in the classroom, books and bears cuddled in their

arms. Families were asked to share their favourite story with others, and we listened to three different, short stories before they went off home to bed. The children either left their books and stuffed animals in the classroom, or promised to bring them back again the next day, to give everyone a chance to share their book with their classmates.

III

Why is it
that children never
step on the cracks?
Is it because it would do violence
to their sense of pattern?
Those beautiful paving-stones,
shaped like the squares
in the game called naughts and crosses,
simply cry out for something planted
plumb in the middle.

She had heard it said
that man is a pattern making animal.
For ever, in sound or sight or movement,
he must be making patterns.

Perhaps he has discovered
that in it lies his salvation.
(Goudge, 1986, p. 212)

From the first day of school, we began to build a collection of favourite stories. These, we would read aloud over and over until we were able to say them from memory. Then, from the familiar text, we began to look at the print itself for details of surface structure, such as capital

letters, words that begin the same, ending letters of words, and the similarities between rhyming words.

The first days of school were also the time when I set the tone for language play. We often played rhyming games, using names and animals. In the beginning, I would start with a pattern, such as 'fishy fishy where's your dishy', 'doggy doggy where's your loggy', 'kitty kitty where's your pitty', and so on, the more nonsensical the better. Later, the children would be able to suggest patterns to use. These were done orally, in groups, and were the source of a lot of laughter and silliness. Then I would write the pattern and a few examples on chart paper and hang it on the wall. As the children learned a nursery rhyme, I would print this out, and hang it up where they could see it. Rhyming patterns emerged from these as well. Humpty dumpty sat on a ball, Humpty Dumpty sat on a tall. Little Miss Muffet sat on a Tuffet, Little Miss Muffet sat on a Puffet. All of these were important because the children were able to find pattern and meaning in them, and the high level of predictability of such couplets would support their search for the mechanisms of the surface structure of language.

Books with lots of bright pictures and highly repetitive, highly predictable, but not boring text are also very useful for the children as beginning readers. These are books like the Sunshine Books and the Story Box books, distributed by Ginn. I read one or two of these every day.

For example we enjoyed, 'Huggles' breakfast', which shows pictures of a friendly monkey-like creature, eating...

"a carrot;

a cake;

a fish;

a bone;

a banana;

a sausage;

a telephone."

And who could resist the delightful 'Mr. Grump'?

"Who growled at the postlady?

Mr. Grump. Mr. Grump. Mr. Grump-grump-grump.

Who growled at the milkman?

Mr. Grump. Mr. Grump. Mr. Grump-grump-grump.

Who shouted at Mrs. Grump?

Mr. Grump. Mr. Grump. Mr. Grump-grump-grump.

Poor old Grump," said Mrs. Grump.

"Let me kiss you better."

Who smiled at the postlady?

Who smiled at the milkman?

Who danced with Mrs. Grump?

Mr. Grump.

Mr. Grump.

Mr. Grump-grump-grump."

Each day, I read stories like these to the group, and we re-read them together several times, laughing with each

other at the pictures, and enjoying the way the words felt in our mouths. Then, some of the children would take the books and they would read them to each other or to themselves.

For most children, this combination of strategies was highly effective, and interest and enjoyment in reading was high.

> Chandre spoke, breaking into my pattern making, and the enjoyment of my remembering. "Why do you think this happens?", she questioned.
> I suggested, "Maybe as a biological species, it is natural for human beings to respond to pattern, and when the language of a rhyme or poem or story is repeated over and over, first the ear and then the eye will begin to take note of the characteristics of patterns. Don't you think that pattern itself has an irresistible fascination for us?"
> Chandre nodded. "Yes. Yes, I suppose it does. I just never thought of it that way before. Actually, if you think about it, there are patterns everywhere around us. There are surface patterns, such as the shapes of letters, and punctuation marks."
> I agreed, and added, "Yes. And there are patterns

held deeply inside us that we know before we can speak of them. Such as that stories have a beginning, a middle, and an ending. There are also the social patterns, such as the princess is always beautiful and passive, and every story has both a black and a white knight. These patterns arise from the human subconscious: we all know what the black knight wants, and we know how the white knight should respond."

# PART FOUR

## I

Before him stood the Tree,
his Tree...

If you could say that of a Tree
that was alive,
its leaves opening,
its branches growing
and bending in the wind
that Niggle had so often felt or guessed,
and had so often failed to catch.

He gazed at the Tree,
and slowly he lifted his arms
and opened them wide.
'It's a gift!', he said...

All the leaves he had ever laboured at
were there, as he had imagined them
rather than as he had made them;
and there were others
that had only budded in his mind,
and many that might have budded
if he had only had time...
(Tolkein, 1964, p. 89)

Chandre spoke up again, breaking in on my reverie. "It's almost like once you can see the pattern of patterns, you can see it, Right?"

I nodded. "Exactly. The difficult part is in coming to that first awareness. The main thing to remember was that in my search, I wasn't just looking for ideas to use, to consume. I didn't go to the conference to find one new thing to try out on a rainy Monday morning. There are no quick fixes for something as complex as a classroom of children and the challenge of helping each one to find their literacy. I was looking

for a whole new way of seeing the classroom. Over the years there were so many, many children. So many different ones, each with individual needs and problems."

"Tell me about some of them. Just a few of them. Won't you?" Chandre coaxed.

## II

Behold the child
among his newborn blisses...
(Wordsworth, 1803-1806, part vii)

One morning, during quiet reading time, Christopher brought a book to me and asked me to read it to him. I chose a paragraph with nearby pictures. The paragraph was a conversation between two bears: "Hello, hello, goodbye, goodbye", and so on. I read this to him several times, using funny voice inflections, and pointed out the "talking marks" around the conversation words. Then my attention was drawn away by other children. I wondered what Christopher would do. Would he continue reading the book himself, 'taking the parts' in the conversation? Or would he just put the book down and wander off? At the time, he grabbed another book and scooted under a table to look at it. It wasn't until the next day that Christopher showed me what he had 'picked up' during that few minutes of conversation.

First thing next morning, he strode to the writing centre, and began to write down a conversation, "talking marks", and all. I realized that he had taken what made sense to him from our moments together the previous day. For the next several weeks he worked at conversation writing for at least half an hour every day. During the sharing time before lunch, he would proudly read his work aloud to the class. He wrote conversations on Post-it notes of various sizes, and stuck them up around the classroom. He wrote conversations in his journal. He drew pictures, and wrote conversations into the art work. He carried on with this for several weeks, until he was ready to go on to other activities.

I thought back to the river, and to the Old Man's words. My few moments of reading a conversation aloud to Christopher had been like dropping a pebble into a stream. The minute or so I had spent with him was his past, his future, and his now. I could not have foretold exactly what the child would do with the pebble I dropped. Because his mind and his life were his own, the play of literacy had to be his own journey. It is one that many others would be involved in, but no one, not even Christopher would be able to fully predict or direct the course of the flow, even moment by moment, and yet the river would flow. And Christopher, with his eyes alight, wrote and shared his ideas with everyone who would listen to him.

I noticed that Chandre looked puzzled. I paused, waiting for her.

She said, "You mean he did all of that himself, used all that energy? Why? Aren't we supposed to motivate the children?"

I answered, "It's much better if they motivate themselves. Actually, you can assume the children are already motivated. What you need to do is to figure out what is of interest. They already have interests. You have to know the children. It isn't easy, but it works a lot better than constantly trying to 'motivate' them. Becoming is something that must be done by the child, but it is not achieved alone. It is a process of ordering, of finding patterns in the surrounding world, and of voicing these patterns as your own. It is a process that defies rational logic. It's unpredictable, but certainly not random. It's serendipitous, but not totally by chance either. The meaning that Christopher made was his own. It came out of the relationship he had with me, and out of all the other relationships in his life, as well as all the perceptions and experiences he had ever had, as well as all his potential for having further relationships, perceptions, and experiences. On that particular day in the

classroom, I could be there to support him, and to listen to his questions, but I could not know precisely what steps he would take, or how or when he would take them."

By the pose of her chin, I could tell that Chandre had another question. I waited.
"But conversation writing is a requirement of the grade four curriculum. Christopher learned to do it with confidence in grade one," she commented.
I explained, "His response to a response I had made to him, had taken him further than I would have predicted. You never know. You just listen and give, and love and hope. The child does the rest."
Chandre nodded. She was beginning to understand.
"Tell me more," she said. "I want to hear more stories."

# III

The jewel
is in your bosom.
Why look for it
somewhere else?
(Shigematsu, 1988, line 557)

One Monday morning when the bell rang, I could hear the children moving down the hall way toward me in short bursts of sound. I met them at the door, and they rippled into the classroom. After putting on their shoes, they settled down in various parts of the classroom, either alone or in pairs, to read or write. Between themselves they sorted out which of them would hold the classroom teddy bears.

With attendance taken, I settled down to write as well. I had begun to write an adventure story starring the children in the classroom. Each day I composed a new episode. The children in the class were all part of the story, as princes, princesses, knights, or ladies. All rode milk-white or coal-black steeds, and fought dragons and wild bears in order to save each other from evil. The children's eyes glowed when I read to them of the exploits of Sir Mike the Powerful, Sir Chris the Magnificent, Princess Beverly the Wise, and so on. Each child had a part, and they listened eagerly for the mention of their own names and those of their friends. Today's episode was "Rescue at the Stone Bridge", which involved a confrontation between Sir Dale and the Red Fairy. Everyone in the class was busy. I

was writing, and the children were all either reading books or writing in their journals. There was an air of anticipation in the room. After twenty minutes, we each shared what we had done. The children watched me and each other closely, fascinated with seeing and hearing stories come alive in their presence.

IV

I think I am a muffin man,
I haven't got a bell,
I haven't got the muffin things
That muffin people sell.
(Milne, 1958, p. 132)

I found the children to be always strictly true to their own needs. They made contributions according to their interests and abilities. Each was a person in his or her own right, and I trusted that what they chose to do was always for a reason, and always fundamentally appropriate. Even if in most classrooms their particular way of expression might have been considered inappropriate. Jonathan, for example, could not tolerate being 'read to' in traditional ways. He could not sit still for story time. If I invited him to sit beside me in the story chair, or to sit nearby on the rug with other children, he would refuse. For Jonathan to listen to stories, his body had to be in full motion at the same time. For him the river of words

had to be one lively, connected flow that allowed his body uninhibited expression, and unimpeded connection with the flow of words.

One afternoon I chose to read A.A. Milne's poem, "Busy" aloud to the class. As I read, "I think I am a muffin man, I haven't got a bell, I haven't got the muffin things that muffin people sell", he rolled his body across the room, timing his summersaults to the roll of the words. Each roll of his body seemed to affirm his presence to the words as well as to himself.

I continued to read, "Perhaps I am a Postman. No, I think I am a Tram. I'm feeling rather funny and I don't know what I am - BUT, Round about and round about And round about I go..." At the word BUT, he got up and jogged around in a small circle. I continued reading, "I think I am an Elephant, Behind another Elephant, Behind another Elephant who isn't really there..." He changed again, and became the elephant, swinging its trunk and lumbering across the room.

In these episodes, the tentative "I think" was transformed into the affirmative, "I am."

Jonathan would, however, happily and comfortably engage in word play with me. There was one book in the classroom that he loved. It was, 'Goin' down the road', a repetitive, predictable book with bright pictures and a short text. I had read it aloud to the class several times, until the flow was familiar. Then I had borrowed a line from the story,

"There's a ___ goin' down the road, bumpity, bumpity, bumpity...." I repeated it over and over, substituting anything that came to mind in the blank. As a class, the children and I played this pattern together, in various versions and tones of voice, taking turns spontaneously, While this was going on, Jonathan again turned summersaults on the floor behind where the rest of the class was seated, his voice chanting the words with the rest of us.

In out-of-classroom situations, I had seen games like this go on without interruption for two hours or more. In this case, the bell rang for recess and the children flooded the playground with their continued variations of the chant.

The children and I had played with the fluidity of meaning within the stable sentence pattern, and the repetition with change, had allowed ripples of infinite variation. The familiar stretched into the unfamiliar and looped back again, like eddies in a stream.

It had been relatively easy for me to see how to remove some of the barriers to intellectual growth. Just realizing that each child was the creator of his or her own mind was a big step. I decided that if the writers of curriculum and texts assumed that literacy was a mechanical process that could be simplified by breaking it into bits, I might do well to explore the possibilities of the opposite. I would "take for granted" that children would do better working within a flow rather than eternally trying to reassemble

broken bits.

I would assume that my mind could never know more than a tiny bit of another's, so why try to tell the children what only they could know that they needed to know, and when? Why not let them show me what they needed, and then provide whatever support I could. Not that as a teacher I would never initiate, for I often did. I provided a basic structure for the activities of the day, but always within the context of the children.

What was Jonathan really telling me? Was he making a physical statement about how his mind worked? Was he showing me that for him, physical freedom was terribly important? Was he telling me that he could not learn if he was restrained, and that he absolutely needed to be able to move? For children, physical expression seems to be crucial to the learning process. Having a classroom of perfectly quiet children sitting at neat desks, would be largely impossible. Irrelevant. Damaging? What could I do to facilitate learning in a physical way? It seemed to make sense that I should arrange tables and chairs in pathways that would allow activity on, under, or behind tables, as well as areas where hands could shape modelling clay, or experiment with sand or water. I provided a fabric tunnel to crawl through as an entrance to an area where there were wooden blocks that could be used to build roads and space ships and so on, and dress up clothes for acting out

stories. I was aware as I did so, that the gardener was here along with me, though I could not see or hear him. He was in the flow of Jonathan's summersaults. He was in the rise and fall of the children's voices as they played.

Bins full of writing and drawing materials, as well as books were placed next to these areas, so that road builders could write construction signs, and so that engineers could draw up plans, if they wanted to. Or not. If they only wanted to build, there was probably a reason why.

Even while I made these adjustments to both the physical nature of the classroom and to my thinking about the way children learn, I wondered how much Mr. Foster, the other teachers in my school, and the parents of the children would understand. If I had seen a teacher doing this a few months before, I probably wouldn't have understood what was being accomplished. How could I know I was doing the right thing? It was the memories I had of grandmother's kitchen and the conversations I had shared in at the literacy conference, that kept me going. That, and my sense of understanding from the gardener. I wondered when I would see him again.

> Chandre leaned forward, about to ask another question. "So no matter what, it's the sharing that is most important? Whether it's reading or writing, or whatever the children are learning?"

I nodded. "Reading comes first for many children, for others writing and reading best come together, and for a few it seems that writing must come first. Such was Jonathan. He expressed his need for the tactile, the need to make mental connections dominantly through physical activity. He learned to write, and from this experience of the shared space, the relationship between the written and the spoken, he began to learn to read. I fit classroom expectations to the need for movement that Jonathan expressed with his body. This child knew he could not learn if he listened passively. I might have tossed words and expectations of their own, into his river to try to direct where and how it should go. With such children, though, their being tumbles, rocks, and wears at this interference. They tend to churn the well-meant, but inappropriate, back out onto the bank."

Chandre smiled at me and murmured, "They must find their own way?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "Their own way, but not alone."

V

Is thy face like thy mother's,
my fair child!
(Byron, 1812, line 1)

Samantha was an example of a child who found her way as a reader with joyful confidence. She had been read to since birth, had a richly varied background of story experience, and had always been encouraged to use her imagination. What would she choose to work with when she decided to learn to read? Given free rein to sample from any of the books on the shelves, she chose four. With a great sense of importance, she took charge of the literacy connection for her own life. She came up to me, holding the pre-primers from the old Ginn reading series, 'My Little Red Story Book', 'My Little Blue Story Book', 'My Little White Story Book', and 'My Little Green Story Book'. I knew that these books had been designed as traditional sight word, limited vocabulary beginning readers and had been published at least a generation earlier. They had been in use in classrooms after the Dick and Jane series had run its course. These books were the last that I would have predicted would have been attractive to a creative, sensitive child like Samantha. But I decided to trust. I read the books to Samantha once, on request, and she took them off under a table by herself. Samantha loved these books. She laughed at the picture of Flip the dog knocking over a paint can,

until tears ran down her face. I read the books to her a second time, if asked, but for the most part once was enough.

Samantha knew enough about the sounds of letters to be able to anticipate most words from the whole context, and from her memory of that first reading. She would come to me for confirmation of a prediction when she felt she needed to. She mastered the books in order, one after the other. Her concentration on these was absolute and intense for at least an hour a day. After about two weeks she could read them from cover to cover, and she knew everything she wanted to know about the relationships between the words in them. She was also able to apply the tacit rules of reading, the patterns and rules she had intuited, to other books she explored, and was well on her way to being an independent reader. What was so special about this, I felt, was that the child had had such fun doing it! I watched her as closely as I could, and found that, not unlike myself, Samantha seemed to be able to develop awareness of patterns very quickly. Phonics, which can be a laborious process for some children, Samantha didn't seem to need at all, except for the initial idea that there is a connection between sounds and letters. For the most part, Samantha's organization of information, grew so fast that I could not follow it. I could only rejoice with the child in her success, and in the ease with which she sailed straight into

most of the rules about reading directly through her experience with text.

Someone gave Samantha a copy of Pierre Burton's 'The Secret World of Og' for Christmas that year. She brought it with her to school after the Christmas break, and worked her way through the full - length chapter book, page by page. It took about a month, but when she was done, it seemed that nothing could hold her back. From there she went directly into the world of Andrew Lang, 'The Red Fairy Book'. The rest of this extensive series of fairy books followed, and before long, Samantha was going to the writing centre to begin stories with, "Once upon a time there was a lovely princess...", and so on.

VI

Beauty she would always have
because it was not a rose
that could fade
or a statue that could be broken
or a love that could die,
but the immanent something
in all these things
that threaded them together into a pattern
that would last as long as human life,
would last until at death
the pattern would give way
to the blinding circle of white light
and the spark of oneself
was absorbed into eternity.
(Goudge, 1986, p. 212)

I often wished that learning to read and write could be so natural and happy for every child, but all patterns are unique. Samantha didn't seem to need a teacher, but she did need someone with whom to check out her hunches, and who had the good sense to stay out of her way unless invited in. From watching Samantha, I witnessed that search for cues and patterns that is innate, that is a natural response to any environment within any environment where they happen to "be." For this child, it seemed just as natural to seek and respond to language cues as it was for her to find meaning in, for example, the body-language of the children around her.

I wondered about this. In Samantha's case, she had always lived in a literate milieu. Interestingly, so had Jonathan. But, Samantha's search for meaning in text had been easier. Living with parents who loved literature, and

possibly because of her personal physical and emotional make-up, she seemed to have been able to generate cues that other literate people, could readily respond to, and vice versa. Is this how it goes from one generation to another, from one person to another? Is literacy brought forth personally, through a child's physical, emotional, and social environment in such a way that to know and to be are one? The ease with which Samantha became a reader seemed to indicate that the ability had practically been bred into the child's bones. The wonder of it was that so much of it was done unconsciously, intuitively. And, although Jonathan was coming into literacy more slowly, he was coming. He would need more time, a lot of practise, and a lot of space, to come to the same level of comfort with the shifting patterns of written language.

> Chandre interrupted here, asking, "And, what about the child who hasn't lived in such a milieu since birth, and the school environment is his or her first immersion in a place where reading and writing is explicitly encouraged? Jonathan and Samantha were both very fortunate in that they at least had some idea of how to relate to the written word."
>
> I replied, "You're right. It was no wonder that some of the children simply didn't know how to

react. Was a child's action of throwing a block across a room really any more absurd than a teacher insisting that a child who has had very little experience with black marks on white paper, should care that those little marks 'mean'?"

I continued, "When I was reading aloud to the children, sometimes one would wriggle behind the chair or the bookshelf."

Chandre finished my thought for me, observing that "And in doing that, the child was possibly expressing the inner barrier in physical terms?"

"Yes,", I said. "In homes where so much of what needs to be done is not done, this not-doing is not deliberate. Sometimes the flow of becoming and being literate, is left to stagnate. But remember what the Old Man told me? That the desire to create the garden, and the ability to listen to the mountain is in all. For some of the children, this ease, this flow, seems to have been dammed, but hopefully not damaged. In the classroom garden perhaps it can be set free..."

For a few moments we sat quietly together. Then Chandre said, "Tell me more."

VII

The grip on his shoulder
was Job's first experience of love.
He did not recognize it,
but he stopped sobbing
and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

He began to feel warmer
and not so wretched.
The grip on his shoulder
gave him a sense of his own identity.
(Goudge, 1960, p. 65)

Ossie was a child who exploded with anger at least three times every day, and during these episodes he would damage anyone or anything near him. He had scars all over his face from his mother's fingernails. He did not listen to adults' words. Words did not reach him unless they were spoken very, very gently. He watched my eyes whenever I spoke to him. If my eyes loved him and were gentle, he could relax and listen, but if I reacted in any other way to his outbursts of violence, it just escalated. Anything could set him off, a look, a word, or an accidental bump from one of the other children.

At the beginning of the school year, I noticed that he would not touch a book with any part of his body. But, he did seem to enjoy listening to stories such as 'The Pancake Man'. He liked me to read this story over and over, especially the part where the pancake ran away from everybody and was sassy. He learned to say the rhyme, "Run, run, as fast as you can, you can't catch me, I'm the Pancake

man." I heard him whispering it to himself over and over. I also noticed that when Ossie listened to stories his whole body moved. I suspected that he could be enticed into further efforts.

I kept my ears open around Ossie, trying to ascertain his interests. From listening to him talk to other children, I found out that he liked the "Knight Rider" TV character. I brought a Michael Knight book and tape set to school for him, and a tape recorder and head phones so that he could listen to it as much as he liked. He couldn't even begin to read the book, but he listened to it on tape, over and over again. He kept it on his desk for days, touching it, and opening and closing the cover. From overhearing another conversation between Ossie and some other children, I discovered that he also liked 'The Black Stallion'. I provided that book and tape set for him as well. Now there were two books of which he would turn the pages, and listen to. And then I provided 'The Black Stallion Returns'. Now there were three. He couldn't read any part of any of these books yet but at least he was listening over and over, allowing himself to drift into the stories. He turned the pages, held the books in his hands, and I saw that sometimes he pointed to the print with his finger. If his listening could attune to the rhythm of oral speech, perhaps his interest in stories could be piqued.

One day Ossie told me that he knew the titles of the

books I had given him. He smiled as he pointed to the words. I had rarely seen Ossie smile. But this smile seemed to come from deep down inside him. It spilled out his eyes. Instead of seeming to dance on balls of tension that usually kept his feet in constant motion, for once he stood completely still in front of me, holding the book in his hands. He stood firmly, his weight balanced on the back of his heels. He looked up at me, his eyes warm amber pools. For once he was calm enough that I could hug him. He hugged me back.

From this beginning he was able to go on to another story. From all the books in the classroom, his choice was 'Harold and the Purple Crayon'. Aside from The Pancake Man, and the three book and tape sets, this was the first book I saw him touch voluntarily. He carried it back and forth between home and school for several weeks, putting it on his desk during the day, and turning the pages during quiet reading time. One day he started to draw a picture with a purple crayon, just like Harold's. He asked me to read the story to him, and I did, several times. He still couldn't read it himself, but he was listening, carefully. He took paper, a purple crayon, and the book off into a corner by himself and began to draw. Soon other children noticed what he was doing, and I was asked to read the book to the class as a whole. Before long, they too were drawing pictures and writing stories, like Harold's and Ossie's. There were

"Dale and the Blue Crayon", "Casey and the Green Crayon", and "Michelle and the Yellow Crayon."

VIII

The plum tree
is plum to its roots,
Seeds and twigs,
leaves and flowers
and fruits,
Everything... plum.
(Shigematsu, 1988, line 99)

Ossie wasn't the only one for whom the symbol system presented such difficulty. In my classroom, there were children who, like Ossie, were very aggressive in class, and others who were all too passive. Brad, a child whose family moved frequently, transferred into the class in mid-year. He was virtually silent in class, and would not take risks of any kind. He would not try to read or write, and he made little effort to relate to the other children. He could not work well in groups and had difficulty playing with other children. He needed to be 'in charge' in a social situation, but did not lash out or argue. He withdrew, rather than yielding to others. He found it difficult to listen to other children's ideas, and very rarely shared his own work. He had a reading vocabulary of about 20 words including his name and the colour words, but he was no longer adding to this. Then, there was Rhonda. She was

repeating Grade One because, due to health problems she had been absent most of the time the year before. She frequently created disturbances by fussing, shouting, crying, and sometimes even hitting other children. She generally refused to follow rules or do as she was asked.

I realized that the problems these children were having was as complex as life itself, and involved the whole of their physical, social, intellectual, and emotional lives. If language is the dominant way in which humans pattern and organize their consciousness of the world and other people, could the lack of success these children were having with reading and writing be contributing largely to their unhappiness? And if I could sense what they didn't know how to do, and could help them to do whatever that was, could I, as their teacher, bring healing through language? I knew I would need to discover both their abilities and their inabilities in order to support their search for literacy. I would have to judge moment by moment both what they knew and what they were ready to begin to know. As these children learned, I knew I would have to 'read' them with sensitivity and accuracy.

IX

Every phrase and every sentence
is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph. And any action
Is a step to the block,
to the fire, down the sea's throat
Or to an illegible stone:
and that is where we start.
(Eliot, 1942)

Finding a quiet time on a regular basis in which I could be with these children was a problem that I solved by having one stay with me during lunch hour, and one after school. On my first private meeting with Rhonda, I handed her a book from the library, and watched the child's reactions. Rhonda's eyes seemed to search the pages of the book desperately. She was very tense, and her search for meaning seemed to be largely unfruitful. It occurred to me that Rhonda's crying and screaming sessions in class, could be a diversion to deflect attention away from her lack of understanding of how reading and writing work. Because of such tactics, the first time I handed her a book it would have been very easy to overlook the way her eyes flashed over the pages, left to top right, then down to the bottom right and then back to top right, but without settling on any of the print, and without seeming to know what to look for. I noticed that, while Rhonda held the book the right way and knew how to turn the pages, at no time did she use her finger to match her voice to any print, and she seemed to have no idea that the marks had any intrinsic

organization.

The next day, when I asked Rhonda to stay so we could work together, the girl shouted, "I'm not reading!", and she crawled under a chair. It took more than a little coaxing to get her to come out and make a start with me. For the next several weeks, I found Rhonda's responses to be very unpredictable. The child's sense of safety seemed to be very precarious, and she needed constant reassurance. If we managed to have a pleasant time together one day, the next we had to start over again. Nevertheless, the day finally arrived when Rhonda was able to enjoy reading, and she also began to write more often. I soon noticed that Rhonda had begun to enjoy coming to school. She had also become adamant about sharing the books she could read and the stories she had written, with other children. One bright April morning, Rhonda took a book from the shelf that she and I had read together the day before. She sat in a chair, and sang the words as she read them. She rocked herself back and forth as she sang, her face, hands and eyes were peaceful. I began to hum with her, "One little fur family, warm and brown, living in the forest green...." Rhonda looked up at me and smiled.

Although Brad's behaviour was not aggressive like Rhonda's, I noticed that he too was unsure as to what he needed to do in order to read. Although he held books right side up, he seemed to be unsure as to whether the pictures

and words related. It seemed to me that Brad's passiveness in class was due to fear. It would be necessary for me to help him to extend what he could read and write very gradually, so that his confidence could increase through success.

In each session together, Brad and I worked on specific reading strategies. When I read aloud to him, I would be very explicit about what I had to do in order to read. I talked to him about how I would look at the beginning letter of a word, how I would look at the pictures, and how I would look at the ending letter, and so on. We used books with limited vocabulary that were highly predictable due to repeated sentence patterns and pictures that had a very high correspondence with the text. The first book, 'In the Box', proved to be a perfect choice for him. I first of all described the content of the book to him, and read it aloud once. Brad discovered that he could read this book, and others like it, with almost perfect accuracy, just from the pictures. He read, "In the box, On the box, Under the box", and so on, his eyes shining, and his voice trembling with excitement.

In writing, we printed high frequency words such as up, in, here, was, and so on, until he knew and could remember them from one day to the next. Every day, we would make up a short language experience story and cut it into three or four pieces to see if he could put it back together again.

This was done in the spirit of a game, as much as possible, in hopes of relieving the child's tension.

Over several weeks, I saw him gradually change. Like Rhonda, he became more sure of himself. He lost the stiffness and the dis-ease that he had learned during his first months in school before he had come to my classroom. During our first session, I had read a small book to him that was about houses inside of houses: "In the red house there is a pink house/And in the pink house there is a yellow house/And in the yellow house there is a green house" etc.) Then, I suggested that we make a "book" of our own using this story as a model. On the first page I printed (at his suggestion) "Brad is in his white house with his family." He took this away with him, as our time was at an end. When he came back the next day, he had filled several pages with pictures of bright purple houses with lots of windows. The windows were divided into four panes each, and were coloured bright orange. Each house had a door, and each door had a door knob. He smiled as he showed me what he had done, and he haltingly read the sentence that I printed underneath each picture, "Brad is in his purple house with his family." After the session, he shared his work with the class. There was a smile on his face, and he moved smoothly across the room. I felt that he had sensed what it was for his own mind to begin to mean, in reading. We had made a beginning.

Gradually Brad began to notice details about print, and to think about what he saw. One day I read "The Farmer and the Skunk" to him, let him read it himself, and then had him take it home to read again. The next day, he brought the book back, and before starting to read, he commented: "You can tell that 'farmer' is longer. It takes longer to say. 'Skunk' is shorter and it takes shorter to say." He pointed to the words as he offered these discoveries.

Another day we were reading 'Come With Me', a book that is very repetitive. The structure of every sentence is the same, with only one word changing in each line. Brad noticed this himself, commenting in a firm voice, "All that changes is the front letter. The rest is the same." He said this with an air of satisfaction after spending a few moments examining the page. Up until now, such perusal had brought forth only a comment about the picture. As he pointed to the words that were the same, and to the one that was different, he said, "All that changes is the front letter in rhymes. These are the same except the rhymes." I helped him to read the first line of this book, but the rest he read independently and with joy. The next day, he continued to make sense of print and pictures, looking for similarities and differences, and making comments. I gave him 'The End' and 'Where Do You Live?' He picked up one, studied the pictures, and then picked up the other. Although the pictures and the story content were very

different these books were part of a set and had coloured geometric shapes superimposed on line drawings, as illustrations. He was fascinated by the commonalities, and went through both books, finding similar shapes. He then looked for similarities in the words and pointed out what he noticed.

During our ninth after school session together Brad showed me that he could read. He picked up a book called 'The Treehouse' and insisted that I cover up the pictures in the book so that he could prove that he was "really reading the words." He handed me a piece of paper and told me to hold it on top of the pictures. I didn't understand what he meant right away and put the paper down. He grabbed it again, placed it in my hand and said, "No. Hold it." His voice was excited, full of pride. His eyes were intent. He grinned. He balanced "The Treehouse" on the edge of the table and turned the pages rapidly. He went fast on purpose to show how "easy" it was for him to read, and to make me keep moving fast too. He laughed at how fast we went. Another day, we had been working for over half an hour and it was time for them to go, he said, "Will you stay here for a bit longer? I want to do more reading." We stayed. I read two books to him, 'The Fierce Bad Rabbit', and 'The Big Red Fire Engine.' Then he read 'Row row row the boat' to me. When he was finished this, he commented on the first, saying that he didn't like the man with the gun. He seemed

alarmed by the story content, as though his sense of justice was not quite satisfied by the outcome. However, there was nothing unsettling in the content of the next book. He smiled at the face on the fire engine, and commented on the bubbles spilling over the page. When it was time for him to go, he took several books with him to read at home.

Not every session ran smoothly. On the same day that he so joyfully read 'The Treehouse' he also refused to attempt 'In the Mirror'. Did he suspect that the book would be too hard? Was he not sure that I would not ask him to do something he couldn't do? I wondered if he would ever feel completely safe. Nevertheless, within a few weeks he had a selection of books that he could read successfully and our sessions could begin with him choosing one or two from an array of familiar books.

Brad sometimes refused to practice printing. Or, if anyone else entered the room he would write NO NO NO NO NO over and over on the slate. Sometimes he got tired. Sometimes I pushed too hard. On those occasions he simply refused to do what I asked. Sometimes he was reluctant to copy the words he was studying "one more time." I explained that Gretzky had to practise a lot before he got so fast at scoring goals. I told him to "print the word fast, just like Gretzky scores a goal." He wrote the word faster, with more concentration, and without resistance a few more times. I finally realized that Brad just didn't know how to shape

many of the letters. I showed him "how" time after time. He remembered something of what I told him and tried to apply it from session to session. I showed him how to print a,c,d,h,n,m,o,p,y, choosing the letters at random, and focusing on those he didn't seem to know. We worked at writing "I can see" for several days, and we worked on words like and, is, it, car. I tried to make up stories for each of these to help him remember the shapes of the symbols, saying, "When we print y we make a short pass and then a long pass. We score the goal. We score again and again."

For both Brad and me it became easier. He gradually gained ease with the symbols. I became more skilled at reading his actions, reactions, and non-actions. For example the first day we had worked on printing y he tried twice and then refused to do more. I took his hand to direct it. He pulled away. I told him to take my hand and make me do it. He relaxed, put his hand on mine and pulled it over the slate, over and over until it became "Easy." The next day he was willing to try himself, over and over. After several sessions during which they had reviewed y, he printed the symbol correctly. I noticed that when he brought his hand over the slate to begin the letter there was a moment's split second of hesitation before the chalk came down for "the short pass." Was he repeating the hockey story silently in his mind as he prepared to print the letter? I asked him. He said, "Yes." His hand moved

across the slate. His eyes followed his hand. He printed the letters several times and then stopped and looked at me.

What was happening when he told me to cover the pictures so that he could prove that he was really reading? What was he showing me in this? He seemed to be telling me that he had discovered that print and spoken language have a stable relationship. Was he standing at that spot where the print becomes invisible and the meaning that is held in the symbols blends into the meaning of our own heart? He no longer focused on the symbols as things in themselves, and thus they no longer veiled the greater meaning, the purpose for which symbols exist, that is to hold in place or to mark thought. Does all language, whether it is spoken or whether it is written, have this metaphoric, transient, playful function? That is, what is said or what is written means because of its origin in experience, and thus evokes that experience. The print itself is not what is meant. The symbol is not the meaning, but holds open a space.

For what?

I remembered reading a book by Gregory Bateson in which he had said several times, "The map is not the territory." Brad seemed to be beginning to realize that print does not always point to itself. The purpose of symbols is to take the mind into meaning. And this is who we are, and who we are becoming. The symbols enter our lives. Our lives and the symbols intertwine. One can only try to provide the

circumstance for such personal events to occur. The teacher must stand close enough to provide affirmation if it is needed but far enough away so that the child's sense of personal excitement and responsibility is not taken away. It is essential that the child be supported in this early ecstasy of sensing that he has the ability to "make sense." It is this blend of freedom with support hovering near that allows the child to strengthen the inner sense of self, the existential "I," and makes it possible for intention to be expressed. I thought back to the workbook approach I had abandoned, realizing that what was happening between Brad and me was not a "transmission" of knowledge in the traditional sense, but it was more like a fine tuning of elements present in the environment so that the child could find his way. It was place, knowing, and being, merging as one.

What intrigued me about Brad's reading of 'The Treehouse' was not only that his relationship with print seemed to have changed, but also that he had made a test for himself and then invited me to share it. On this early venture into the transcendence of symbol into meaning he had played. The idea was a toy for his mind. He had tested his mettle and showed off, making the task more difficult than I would have asked. It was a personal victory celebrated. It seemed important to him that I acknowledge his cleverness and affirm him in the risk he was taking as he invented this

tightrope for himself to walk on. He showed me how safe and strong he felt in himself, with the print, and with the process of reading. He was willing to dare himself and me, and he did it with a sparkling joyfulness that a few days earlier would have seemed impossible. Acting within the relationship between us, the safe, social place, he had gathered his own strength. He had learned how to listen to these texts. In order to help him to achieve this I had listened to him listening. He had come so far. Such a short time ago I had wondered whether or not he was able to use a picture and what little he knew of text, to create something more, an idea, a place to mean.

It seemed that he wanted me to acknowledge his cleverness. It seemed that he wanted to express the strength he felt. He created a tightrope for himself to walk on. Did he do this in order to reveal to himself how safe a world he had made?

There was something happening here that was more than the pieces in front of us. There was action of mind. Brad's mind. Why does the human mind play, I wondered. Just because it can? Play such as this is transformational, allowing the enfoldment of worlds within worlds, a virtual reality rather than an escape from or contrast to reality. Being is created through the enfolded, recursive action of play in being and being in play. Once Brad knew what was predictable and stable about the symbol system, he began to

play with changing the stable into the unstable, continually making something new.

One day, Brad read 'Rain on the Cars'. On his first time through the book he read most of it without assistance, reading smoothly and fairly quickly. When he reached the page, "rain on the vans", he figured out 'vans' by himself from looking at the pictures and the text. He commented that his grandmother has a van. His eyes were bright as they scanned the page. His face was alive with his intensity of thought.

Another time, I read 'Hand, hand, fingers, thumb' to him. He liked the bouncy rhythm of this book and his voice and eyes were active throughout the reading. He tried to match his voice to mine. Nevertheless this was an unfamiliar book to him. It had a hard cover and was much larger and thicker than most of the books we had done together. As I began to read the book his body was turned slightly away. About half way through he turned toward the book, while continuing to match his voice to mine.

In his writing that day he did, "We are putting all of our little stuff in the station wagon." When writing 'stuff', he knew and could write all the sounds except 'u.' He didn't know the symbol to match that sound. I told him to raise his arms and with my hand I traced the U shape made by his body. I said, "U holds up its little hands and says u-u-u. You say u-u-u, Brad." But he grinned and said "a-

o." He seemed to be making a joke with me. He was playing, being a little bit silly. The next day he needed to read "up." Again I put his hands in the air and said "U holds up its little hands and says u-u-u. You say u-u-u Brad. This time he listened carefully and made the sound. I had a feeling that this time he would remember.

Unfortunately, our play with literacy was over. Brad was moving away and I would not be able to spend more time with him. I knew that he was not yet an independent reader. We would have needed to spend several more weeks together in order to accomplish that. Now, he was only half ready to leave, and I feared that his parents and other teachers would not be sensitive enough to him. I was afraid that he would become bewildered again in a world where there was too much too soon. The last thing I asked him to do was to tell me what he thought about having had these extra reading lessons. I began, "You liked our special times..." and he said, "because it's fun and you learn more reading. You learn so you can work in your new school. Reading is special. It's good. The more you have fun with reading the more you can learn."

For our last time together, I brought two books for him to keep. In the front of 'Mouse, Rabbit, and Elephant' I had written, "For Brad Royer from Ms. Mari. I will miss you very much." He read the book to me, only needing help on a few words such as "Roundabout." He was very pleased. The

last page of the story had no text. He told me we should write some words on that page. He said, write, "And they all went to the hospital." Then he read the book through again, also reading my dedication to him and the new ending. I had brought 'Just For You' as well. I read it to him, with him reading the "just for you, but..." parts. He asked me to write the same words in the front of this book as I had written at the front of Mouse, Rabbit and Elephant, and watched closely as I wrote "For Brad Royer from Ms. Mari. I will miss you very much." He helped me to sound out the words as I wrote them and checked that nothing was different from in the first book. He pointed out that my 'F' on from was not very neat. I apologized and he said, "It's OK." He also commented on the 'er' in his name, and found the 'er' in 'her' in another book and compared them.

On his last day, I walked out to the parking lot with Brad, where his mother was waiting with his brother and baby sister. He climbed in, and they waved as the loaded station wagon pulled away. I stood, watching them go. I knew that Brad had more confidence in himself, and knew a lot more about reading and writing than he had when he had first arrived, and he wasn't so reluctant to share his ideas with other children in class. Brad's mother confided to me that she had been concerned for Brad, because, he "Just has to do things his way and won't listen to anyone else." I marvelled at how important it had been for this inflexible

child who couldn't take risks, to find himself playing with the danger of the dare in a game that he had made, as he did on the day he read 'The Treehouse'.

X

He sees no stars
who does not see them
first of living silver
made that sudden burst
to flame like flowers
beneath an ancient song,
whose very echo after-music
long has since pursued.
(Tolkein, 1964, p. 98)

As I walked slowly back into the school that day, I wondered how Brad's difficulties with reading had ever come about. I had asked his mom if they read to him at home, and she had said that she did read to him, in fact Brad would insist that she do so. But when I had probed further, I found that Brad's mom didn't show him beginning letters, or show him how to "play" with the text of the book as she read to him. Were these details important, I wondered. Brad had had so much more difficulty, for example, than Samantha. Were the differences in Samantha's implicit knowledge of reading a cumulation of the clues her parents had incidentally highlighted as they had read to her, things that they did for her comprehension of the reading process without consciously realizing that they were doing so? I

remembered listening to Samantha's mom read to her once. We had been on a field trip, and I was sitting near them on the school bus. Samantha's mom had brought a book along in her purse. It was P.D. Eastman's "Are You My Mother?" They had played intensely with it. I remembered comments like, "Wow, look at that big letter B...He sure has a big tummy...B for big. How big are you, Samantha?" They had gone beyond the literality of the print itself into humour, and into being in charge of the meaning to be experienced. This parent had, every once in a while, lifted the child's hand in hers, and run her finger along the words. I realized that when she had done this, she had inadvertently been teaching the child a great deal about the reading process. She had shown the direction in which reading goes, as well as how the voice follows a line of print. As they had read this little story over and over again, Samantha's mother had occasionally pointed to key words. Once, she had laughingly refused to turn the page until she and the child had both guessed and laughed about the word that was to come next. And, when they had both had a chance to guess the word, they had laughed about what that word would look like. They had tried to remember how it starts, and so on. But it was all done in fun. None of this subtle 'teaching' precluded their happiness of being together, the warmth of a small body close to a big one, and the music of their voices.

How subtle were the differences in the background this

child had experienced, from what Brad had known, and yet both parents had meant well and had done what came naturally to them. One was more effective in giving clues to the reading process, that was all. All? No. Literacy comes along with being together. I smiled. The kitchen dance of my grandmother had also had another dimension...the joy of the dance had been intertwined with this same subtle dropping of cues. It had seemed so natural and it had been so much fun, that I had learned to do it on my own as soon as possible. Even now whenever I read a word or print a letter, something of that being together is still there.

Learning to read and write is like crossing a desert, I thought. It's easy if you live there. If you live there, you know how. Had Brad lived somewhere else?

The intensity of the action that must take place as we play at the edge of literacy requires some special knowledge. In the beginning, one stands like a bedouin at the edge of a mass of shifting, inscrutable sand. How does the mind, like the bedouin, cross the face of the desert with no map, and no trail to follow? To those who cannot see into the grains of sand and read their inner story, those who are uninitiated like Brad was, this is a great mystery. There are so many letters, many have different sounds but the same shape. There are so many combinations, and so many different pattern. And there are patterns within pattern. So much is unknown that to the non-reader,

the act of reading seems to be magical. But the sand speaks clearly to the desert dweller. By paying attention to the colour and texture of the grains he gets where he needs to go. He reads the desert by perceiving minute differences between grains of sand. Grains that come from the gulf of Arabia have a different texture and colour than those originating in the Red Sea.

In our sessions together Brad had tested and played with letters and words and stories, as with sand. He learned the significance of each bit of information, gleaned meaning from context through sensitivity to the characteristics of the stimuli, and learned to tell the difference between the grains, by following me. Often those differences were small but very important, as the difference between a p and a q, or a d and a b, or an e and a c. With direction and support, he both sharpened his perceptions and was affirmed in his attempts. He began to make his way freely and surely. Like the bedouin crossing the desert, by paying attention to the sand, he began to notice similarities and differences in the way words look on the page, and how they feel in the mouth. His confidence grew as I consistently supported his interpretations. The joy of his body, his grins and chuckles, had signalled his entry into remaking the world of literacy from an landscape of pain into an oasis full of life. And alongside him, my mind spun like a whirlwind, trying to keep up, trying to be there

the moment I was needed as he lept through his vortex of unmaking/making.

As I stood watching the dust from Brad's mother's car settle on the road, I thought about the desert, and how Brad was now on his way to finding an oasis. But I stopped still as I realized that not only did he need an oasis, but that oasis must be himself. Once he was the oasis, he would be the place of growth, change, play, independence, and freedom. He would himself be the place where reading and writing would be in his life as limitless possibilities for expression and involvement. He would not need me beside him any more. My voice would be forever held in the grains of sand, and in the trees and grass of his oasis.

When Brad becomes the oasis himself, Brad would be able to go wherever he wished as a reader and as a writer.

On this journey through the desert, the journey itself would bring him to the strong sense of the "I am" that he needed. He would be his own agent of change, the I at the centre spinning with his own flow of being.

His perceptions would continually mark out, interpret, and organize information. Becoming literate is reading cues which enable the mind to make up the whole system of interpretations, but these belong to the socially understood perceptions that belong within the culture. He would someday realize that he would always be his own centre within a relational, shared world. As the oasis, he would

be able to focus on the unmarked without losing his grip on the marked. He would learn that he could choose the fixed points, the "is", and could change these at will or even make them into a perpetual "if." The travel itself would be the literacy of his life.

> Chandre plunged in here, after taking a deep breath.
>
> "What could this mean for curriculum?", she asked.
>
> I gave her the best answer I could.
>
> I said, "This kind of curriculum would be one that is created "on the go" as significant connections form within relationships and between minds. This is a social process, and much more subtle and more complex than the simple transmission of information. When I worked with Brad, I felt that I had brought him to a more complete knowing of his own possibilities. He had begun to read how to learn, not just to learn how to read."
>
> Chandre asked, "Is that why literacy in the early years is so crucial?"
>
> I responded, "I think so. The child must deal effectively with the complexities of both our symbol and social systems from the earliest days in school on. The same complexities that make these systems workable also make them very hard to

penetrate until you know what to look for. As a teacher what I could do is stand within the midst of my own freedom and celebrate Brad's own finding of the inner spring that bubbles with sweet clear water."

"So, your ability was to read the child and to respond to him moment by moment?", Chandre asked.

I clarified, "For both teacher and child the "I" was set free to enter a wider world, a world that is of its own making but made with another, not made alone."

Chandre pursed her lips, and asked, "What happens when a mind "takes" or understands the symbols, the print and the wholeness of the book? Why the joy? Why the shining in the eyes?"

"I don't know", I replied. "I just know that Brad seemed to play with the words as he would with a toy. He found out what he could do with them. He used imagination to recreate the pictures. He imagined my surprise. He imagined his own success, and his own pleasure. He did so much more than ask me to cover the pictures so that he could prove he was reading. He went where he wanted to go, and the wanting was part of the going, and part of his transformation."

Chandre spoke again She asked, "What makes it

possible for us to create our own meaning and to share knowledge of the world with others?"

I said, "Is it the open nature of being? What does literacy itself have to do with this playful response, this being easy with the symbol system? Being able to play within and with the structure of the language allows one to participate in the re-creation of the langauge. It is this kind of knowing that gives the ability to take risks that Brad and Rhonda did not have when they had first came to my class a few weeks earlier. When they had first arrived, they did not have the knowledge of the structures, but having been given the structures they began to play with them as soon as they found them to be familiar. The structures were shown, and they were invited to try them out by watching me play with them. They then played, engaged, made meaning, and within this world made safe by the play of their own minds, they were changed. Both the child who had been a frightened, passive non-reader, and the child who had been a frustrated, aggressive non-reader, became busy, happy participants who were able to act within their own understanding to change their conscious world."

Chandre suggested, "So, the child is the main

force in the creation of his or her own life?"

XI

> We can grant that every individual
> [has a] private world of meaning,
> conceived out of the integrity
> and dignity of his/her personality.
> (Axline, 1964, p. 7)

How important was this view of the child as the main force in the creation of his own life? When I had taught in the Grade Three/Four class that first spring, there had been a child described as mildly autistic, who hadn't been able to tolerate having his hand touch a desk. He constantly wiped his hand off because he believed that when he touched the desk bugs would crawl from it onto his skin. This made it very difficult for him to complete written assignments. Before I took over the class a teacher aide had kept track of the times he held his arm properly on the desk. She "rewarded" him when his behaviour was appropriate. Because I felt that everyone involved could make much better use of their time, I covered his desk with a large piece of pink paper. There suddenly were no more "bugs," and therefore there was no more need for modification of that particular behaviour. I listened to what the child's actions were saying and responded in a way that allowed him the freedom to interpret his own reality. I felt that if he didn't like to have his skin touch the desk he should not be forced to

tolerate it, especially if the problem could be easily solved. Besides, I could remember learning about germs as a child, and from that I knew desks are covered with germs. Or bugs.

I believed that only through listening to the child would I be able to teach. Shouldn't my listening be an embodied acceptance that sets the child free to accept himself, and recognizes the central role every individual must play in his own world? What then is teaching? It must be far more than the transfer of information. Whatever it is it starts with listening, and transforms into the kind of freedom that can only be gained through communication between people. We need to recognize that education requires great sensitivity on a human level, and the curriculum of choice should be one that is primarily concerned with the dynamics of human relationships. Curriculum as lists of skill objectives would then be seen as an important but secondary issue. Even in this secondary role it would still be dependent on the quality of the communication processes that take place between people for any impact it might have on the body or mind of students.

I thought of teaching as listening to children who, through their actions and words constantly state their needs and position. To teach, I felt that I must tune myself to hear their messages, and trust the messages that are sent. My responses must attempt to lead the children into more of

themselves. Why argue with a child who believes there are bugs on his desk? If he perceives bugs then he perceives bugs. Would I change his mind by acting as though his reality was invalid? But if I allowed him to know that I respected his perceptions, which is that part of himself out of which he brings forth his own life, I might help him to re-frame his reality. If I alter the context just a little with a piece of pink paper, if I tilt the world just a tiny bit and then stand with him while he considers this new view, who can tell what might happen? Respect and trust are essential to listening. When I set students free to be themselves they could begin to find their own freedom, and they even begin to find themselves, their own "I." It is only in the kind of freedom that is attained through such listening and trusting that the human spirit can begin to find itself, its own wholeness, and to bring forth its own sense of well being, or being well in the world. And with this, sensitivity to "other" may begin.

> Chandre smiled at me. She said, "How did you know what to do? Isn't it hard to walk in somewhere you're new, and change the way people have been treating a child?"
>
> "Its harder to keep doing something you sense is no longer appropriate. It seemed to me that authentic listening also required that I not be

afraid. To teach a child such as this one was, I knew I must trust that if I went along wherever it was that he was going, we would wind up somewhere, and wherever that somewhere was would be OK for both of us. Many adults who saw this child engaged in his obsessive wiping thought it was weird, and wanted to make him stop, to dam him up. Before I had arrived at this school, the aide assigned to work with him had spent two years on behaviour modification charts, working toward extinguishing this behaviour and others. But, although he had reduced the amount of time he spent wiping off his hand, he continually designed other odd behaviours... But perhaps a large part of my success as his teacher was that I wasn't afraid of the divergent nature of his thinking. No matter what he came up with, I refused to see either the child or the behaviour as weird."

"But didn't he act more weird?", asked Chandre.

"No. The funny thing about this was that after a while he stopped coming up with strange behaviours when he was around me, although he still carried on the game with his parents and other adults. He soon discovered that I would accept that very intimate and sacred part of his human-ness, his mind. I trusted that whatever logic he was

following was indeed a logic to him. I knew that I could never change his logic, but if I entered his, I might understand him and be more able to listen to him. If I could hear him then perhaps I might be able to help him to become attuned to new possibilities within himself. And if it happened that I could not understand him at least I would not condemn him and thus isolate him from me even more. He responded to my listening by indeed acting in more "normal" ways, at least in the classroom setting. He made a most unusual step for an autistic child. He began to show that he could listen to others too."

Chandre mused, "Listening is healing? I never thought of that before."

PART FIVE

I

Jenny told her one day
what Mr. Loggin had said
about looking at someone
and forgetting yourself
and then finding
that someone has come alive
between the two of you,
making the three of you one.

"That's love," said Froniga.
"But he's a person,"
said Jenny with conviction.
"Love is a person",
said Froniga with equal conviction.
"And to be made one
with the object of your love,
and with love, the eyes of your body
are not always necessary.
The spirit has its own sight, you know,
and distance
makes no difference
with your spirit."

"I don't see with my spirit,"
said Jenny. "I remember.
I remember Will and Father
and Mr. John Loggin."

"Memory is the spirit-sight
I spoke of," said Froniga.
"But memory, like bodily sight,
is blindness without love."
(Goudge, 1958, p. 316)

Chandre was sitting quietly with me, still listening. She asked, "Did it work for all the children?"

I shook my head, and said, "Did it work? It is for the children to say, not me. I felt that it worked better, more often, for more of the

> children, than what I had done before. It wasn't perfect. It was always a challenge. A class is a living thing. It requires constant involvement, and constant care. Every class is a little different. Every individual reacts differently to the situation as he or she finds it to be."
> "Did you ever hear from the Gardener again? After those first two times? Or didn't he come back to you after you went to the conference and found people who could help you?", Chandre wondered...

Yes. The gardener was always there. It was he who most of all helped me to find myself as a teacher. He came to me once just after the literacy conference. It was just a day or so before that next term was to begin, and I had been preparing for the Grade One class. I was at the school late one evening, and I remember I was standing staring out at the sky. Behind me I heard the soft, sure tones of his familiar voice. I turned around. The Old Man had come back, but I don't suppose he ever left. He settled himself on a rug in centre of the room, and with a gesture invited me to sit with him. He began,

> Consider this. There was once a child. He stood at the tangled, wild edge of a mountain lake, and saw from far away, an island half hidden by mist. It appeared as the form of a garden, even though it could never

> have known the hand of a gardener. It seemed to the child that this scene was a Japanese garden written large. He had come to the edge of the lake merely to observe, and was instead caught by his senses in a moment of awakening. He found himself listening to the silence. Later, when he wandered away from the shore he found that the mountain garden was within him, but written small, as memory. All his listening, his doing, his being, and all his knowing were now of the form of this eternal, living silence. The child grew, and he went forward continuing to repeat in small what nature had shown him, prolonging that moment of awakening in thought, in motion, and in change. He continually became more who he was, expressing that as he who carried the larger garden within, as his life.

As the Old Man spoke, it seemed to me that everything he said took form in the room around us. We were no longer sitting in a classroom in a flat roofed building on a hill. The Old Man's voice invoked the garden, and the spirit of the garden, of which he taught. He continued,

> Now, there are different kinds of gardeners, just as there are different kinds of gardens. One gardener will develop a facility with his craft, and perform his duties over and over out of necessity. Necessity and repetition form and frame the limits of his world. He

plants and prunes because it must be done. Rows of peas, beans and potatoes will feed the family, and are grown for that purpose. He does not work with any particular awareness that what he does goes beyond himself, or has any significant effect on his being. But even though this work does not come from his heart, the garden grows.

There is another kind of gardener. He knows intimately the soil with which he works, as well as the winds and rains that come in season. Necessity and repetition are not a limitation of creation because for him, the act of making transcends what he molds with his hands. He chooses a certain bush because he likes its shape, a flower because of its colour, and he sows grass because of the soft carpet that it will become. I'll try to think of plants that would be familiar to you, words I learned after coming to this country. He plants trailing verbena because his father did. Creeping Charlie and blue pansies make him smile as he did when he was a child playing in his grandmother's garden. The smell of lilacs take him back to his first walk through a summer evening with his sweetheart, when they both were young. Every year he selects certain potatoes, the long fat ones with slightly yellow centres to save and replant and cultivate carefully, until he develops a strain locally known as "Grandpa's

potatoes", and each year he gives away a few to other gardeners, who want to 'make a start'. Rows of peas, beans, carrots, and potatoes feed his family too. But while this garden grows, the gardener grows as well. The garden expresses the memories of both body and heart. There is much of the maker in the made, and there is much of the made in the maker.

Then, there is the gardener whose craft becomes art. Plants are chosen for the effect that they will give as they mature. Shrubs, trees, moss, and grass are planned waves of green that are carefully designed to fall in patterns across a hill side. And yet these patterns are subdued so to be mere suggestions, and do not appear forced. The gardener's sensitivity to nature becomes the potential of the garden. His ability to attune to his surroundings is so intense that views of mountains, lakes or hills that he has seen outside the garden, are remembered and brought carefully into chosen settings, so that they repeat in small what occurs outside. A dogwood is chosen and planted just so, behind a sandstone rock, just far enough from the path so that the sunlight will catch it. A waterfall and rock garden are placed in such a way that the trees around it will always shelter a visitor who sits breathing in the tranquillity that is created by the blending of the gentle sounds of

stirring leaves, silent stones, and running water. This gardener's activity goes far beyond mere necessity and repetition, because it is his desire to remember what has gone before, and to prehend what may be, while articulating nature through the work of his body. There is a unity between maker and made that resonates within itself, but his attention to the garden is so careful, and his presence so implicit that while it is always evident, it is never noticed.

It was so with this child of whom I speak. Garden and gardener became one. Two unities in one path. He became Master of Flowers, and knew what it was to "capture a landscape alive", in the creation of a "borrowed garden." In his garden, nature alone appeared to be the gardener, but everything there had been placed with reverence and care. For the garden, the Master of Flowers borrowed from views first carved by rivers flowing down the face of the mountain toward the sea. He borrowed the view he had seen as a child from the edge of the mountain lake, the one in which hearing had awakened to listening. In the garden, he repeated the outline of the mountain in mounds of earth and rock, stands of pine, and clusters of shrubs. Thus the garden became more than a garden. It became a commemoration of his very life.

The old man paused, and was silent for a very long time. I looked around. His story had spun a garden so lovely, so fresh and green around us. So tranquil. The old man and the garden seemed to be waiting. Suddenly, I realized why. He was waiting for me.

"Why do you do it?", I asked.

"Do what?", he answered with a grave smile.

"What it is that you do," I answered. "I enjoy the peace of this place. But when I look around, I see you have been at work, slowly, patiently, like nature itself... A snip here, a pull there. A bit of wire to tie a branch, or a cut with the saw and then you dress the wound..."

He made no reply, so I continued, "Such peace. Tranquillity. Such a pleasant place you make with your snips and pulls and tying back. But, it seems strange that such measures are necessary in the making of a garden...Isn't it strange?" I asked.

He looked at me, and responded, "In what way does this seem strange to you?"

I answered, "It's very harsh. Isn't it? Must nature be prodded, bent and forced to be beautiful?"

His hands traced the shape of a blossom. He leaned over and drew its scent into his body. He answered, "I am the gardener. I am Master of Flowers."

For a while there was silence. Finally the gardener

spoke again, saying, "To be Master of Flowers I must be master of myself. I must know the way to myself."

I was puzzled, a little, but perhaps not quite as puzzled as I allowed myself to sound. I said, "What does knowing yourself have to do with gardening?"

He smiled, as though he knew that I already knew the answer, but I had not quite yet realized that I knew.

He said gently, "It has to do with hearing the mountain. It has to do with the flow of the river of life. Discipline lies at the heart of peace and beauty, as well as life and death. The river of life flows from the centre of the garden. By discipline I show the garden the way to itself. I must wound in order to know."

I smiled back at him, and answered, "But I notice that none of the things you do are very much..."

"All together each little thing is enough," he said.

I was still not quite sure of myself. I asked, "Ah. But how do you know what it is that you should do? How do you choose which branch to cut off and discard, or which twig to bend or twist or fasten today so that tomorrow beauty will be achieved?"

For a long time, for the time it takes a hawk to sail a summer wind, the time it takes for a stream of water to wear thin the face of a mountain rock, the time it takes for a child to fill a pail with sand...he did not answer. The sounds of the garden swelled around us, and still he did not

respond. Then, finally, he said, ever so gently, "How do I know? I don't always. But I do what I can do. I listen."

"Listen!," I exclaimed. "To the symphony of plants, rocks, hills and streams? Is that what you mean?"

He answered me, "To know is to do is to be. I listen for the harmony of these three. The harmony is within as well as without. It is in all things and it runs through the human heart as well. It is all one. Through listening I sense what the garden might be. Then I bring forth that becoming. Thus I show what I have sensed. The garden is as much about the gardener as it is about trees, rocks, and tranquillity."

I looked around me. The pool was still. The shadows of carp flickered, and the leaves on the trees above were still. I found another question arising in my mind. I said, "When I come here I do not perceive the harshness of this discipline of which you speak. What has this delicate harmony and this beauty of stillness have to do with your saw and wire?"

He bowed his head for a moment before he answered. Then, he explained, "What you sense is that which remains once discipline has done its work. Discipline is not necessarily harsh. But it is quite sure of the action that must be taken."

I queried, "The garden itself is a distilled discipline?"

For a few moments neither of us spoke. Then the gardener said, "Yes, and more. Such peace begins with knowing that silence is not empty. And that one finds the voice of silence only through facing both life and death, and dying in life and living in death. A flower's bloom is the essence of the death in which it is rooted. In this way the life of the garden is not different from the death of the garden. Listening is the way from death to life and from life to death, and that which is between, is the garden. That is why to pluck a blossom is to celebrate the beauty of the individual flower, and it is also to commemorate the continuation of the garden through its death. Such death may seem to be harsh."

"So would you say that all discipline is good? That discipline is the key to all?"

He said gently, "There is no one answer to all, except the all itself, which is nothing. Discipline that brings the self toward wholeness is good. Discipline that brings mind, body and soul into oneness with the earth and the sky and the all is good. There is discipline that aims to destroy the wholeness, to deny the heart for example. The heart must learn to bring itself into harmony with the all, to still its crying, and look with faith upon the nothing. The heart is selfish, and must learn that it is not the only aspect of life. But neither can wholeness be attained by complete denial of the heart. That is not what I mean."

For a moment, I found myself near to tears because of the compassion and gentleness of this man, and the depth of his understanding. I struggled to speak calmly. "But I thought that this was only a garden. I thought a garden was just a place where peace happened because there are rocks and plants and flowers here...a place where nature had been allowed to be...an opening in the midst of the busy city where human actions have not taken place, if you know what I mean. A place where beauty, peace, and harmony emerge because man has **not** done."

The gardener had been looking away from me, watching a leaf shadow stir against a rock lantern. When he turned his face back toward me, I saw that he too was speaking through tears. "The garden is a place where nature has remembered itself. As Master of flowers, I am the Master of memory. I stir the soil, listening to the wind and the rain, and then I plant, I cut away or I tend and nurture, disciplining until nature remembers itself very, very well. You could say that I teach nature to hear itself listening to itself..." His voice trailed off. After a moment of silence, he resumed, "But let me tell you a story. This was a memory told to me by my grandfather, who was a gardener as well...

> Once there was a man who had no memory. He came to my grandfather to ask for work because although he had no memory he was not dead. Although he could hear, he

could not listen, and so he needed to work. He needed to reawaken the possibility of memory through sending the blood of his life down a course that would give meaning and shape to his being. He needed to reawaken his ability to come to himself once more, and so to delicately shape the path of his own life."

I smiled at him. "Work is a way of being healed? Is that something like discipline? When work is part of a harmony of the whole?"

He smiled. "Yes, you're beginning to listen very well...Where was I...?

"The man who had no memory came to the garden to try to find it again," I reminded him.

"Ah. Yes. He found that because he had no memory he had no being. He had no tool for shaping himself. He hoped that the garden would show him how to find the way back to his own story-through-time. This is where my grandfather would always stop talking. We would sit a long, long time waiting and listening to the wind stirring the branches. When he finally spoke again he would say only one thing. It was, 'When the mountain speaks, and remembers itself, the garden blooms'. It took me many, many years to hear meaning in this.

I interrupted, "But just a minute. If this man had no memory how did he know he had no being?"

"He didn't always know. But it came to him one day, because of the pain. And because of the pool. One day he leaned over the garden pool, as he had done many times before, and saw his own reflection. But this day, when he saw his own face, he felt a terrible pain like the pain of being born. Or the pain of dying. That was when he knew that he had had no memory of himself. For him, that was when memory was reborn. In the pain was the potential for the healing of this separation from his own being. And of course, over his shoulder he saw the mountain towering behind him. It is the mountain that is whole. If we would be whole, we must listen to the mountain until we hear our own heart beating."

I broke in again, "You say that he knew he had had no memory when he saw his own reflection in the pool?"

He patiently repeated, "Yes, but remember, he also felt the presence of the mountain. And he knew that in order to find himself he must hear the mountain. The mountain stands alone against the sky, but its face is reflected in all the pools of the forest. All gardens are only a memory of the mountain, a commemoration of the mountain being present to itself. Memory is more than information carried in the mind. It is our hearts as well as our hands and our feet. It is our desire and our joy as well as our sorrow and our need."

With this, the gardener fell silent. I sat with him.

The light had nearly faded from the sky outside, when I finally spoke again.

I said, "By the way, what happened to the man in the story. After he found his memory?"

His voice was still so gentle, as he answered, "You tell me."

I was confused and asked, "How can I tell you? It's your story. Or yours and your grandfather's."

He shook his head, and suddenly I knew what he would say. "No. It's your story. That was the meaning of my grandfather's tale. You are the man. You are the woman. And you are the garden. I am the man, and I am the garden...We are what we remember."

I trailed my fingers through the grass, feeling the strength of the blades. I tugged gently, to feel how tightly bound to the earth my fingers were when so entwined. For once it was he who spoke first. He asked, "What kind of work do you do?"

"Me? I'm a teacher. You know that!"

He responded, "Then how we know memory can be quite different. Or it can be quite the same."

I waited.

"While my memory is a tool for bending and shaping nature within its own rhythms, you may try to apply texts to mind. I bring body and mind together as one, so that one blade of grass speaks for the whole. One flower speaks for

the whole. The whole and the part are the same thing, as memories of each other. Resonance of inner and outer is such that there is no difference. One disappears in the other, and yet does not get lost. The forest is the garden. The garden is the forest. It all depends on where you look, and how you stand. Perhaps to you, memory is only like a tool, something that is outside the being. Or, perhaps to you, memory is as it is to me."

I whispered, "I think I'm beginning to understand."

He looked at me seriously, and said, "There is another tale that my grandfather told. It was about an old man who stood alone at the top of a hill. The Master of Flowers paused to bend a twig toward the sun."

"Yes. Go on," I said.

The gardener folded his hands. His eyes were half-closed. He began,

*"There was an old man standing alone at the top of a hill. Three young men came along the road below, and noticed him up there, and they began to wonder what he was doing. As they wondered, they began to talk to each other. One said, 'He's gone up there because he wanted to see the view. From up there he can probably see the whole valley and the mountains beyond.' The second young man, wiping his face and neck said, 'No, I think he's gone up there because it's so hot today. He's enjoying the breeze.' The third said, 'Perhaps

you are both wrong. Let's go up and ask him why he would toil up that slope to stand all alone and bareheaded under the sun.'

The Master of Flowers paused to cut back a patch of moss and brush clean the tops of the stones underneath.

He resumed, "Together, the three young men left the road and climbed the hill. All the while, the old man stood quiet and still above them. It was hot, and the sweat poured down their backs. They panted, and paused several times, to catch their breath. It began to seem a long way to come just to ask an old man a question. When they finally drew near, the first young man said, 'Old man, why do you stand here at the top of this hill? What are you doing? Enjoying the view?' The old man did not answer, so the second young man spoke. 'Old man, is it the breeze that attracted you? Did you come up here to sit in the cooling wind?' Again the old man did not answer. The third young man said, 'Please tell us sir. What is your reason for being here? We saw you from the road below, and climbed all this way just to ask you to explain.' The three young men sat down beside the greybeard, to wait. After all, they were tired from the long climb. The view from the top of the hill was wonderful, and a refreshing breeze blew across the grass. Slowly, because nobody spoke,

they began to hear the crickets chirp, and they began to notice tiny flowers hidden in the grass. Ants crawled over their hands, and they did not brush them away. They began to feel the coolness of the earth beneath them as a complement to the afternoon sun. After a long silence, the old man finally spoke. He said, 'I'm here because I'm here.'* (* adapted from a traditional tale.)

With this last, The Master of Flowers turned away and walked down the path towards the pool.

I sat in the silence and wondered how it is that one listens in a way that makes a difference. I found myself remembering that as a child I had visited an uncle who lived near the mountains. One day I had stood looking out of a window. What I had seen had seemed to be a garden, but as I looked out, I realized that it was a view that I had already seen many times, as in a dream. It was not a garden as I would have expected a garden would be. The more I studied the scarcely tamed scene, the more it seemed that the trees, bushes, rocks, and grass spread below me were an intentional repetition of the rough hills and mountains I could see in the forest beyond. In this garden by the edge of the forest it was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. I had walked out toward a point that I had seen from inside, where it seemed that the garden became forest.

Could I find that same point if I walked beyond it, turned and came back? Would I see where forest became garden? But in moving toward this point of change, it had vanished. The difference that was the one, was enfolded in the other so that it could no longer be found. In the moment that the garden had disappeared in the forest, and the forest had disappeared in the garden, I had felt that my body had disappeared as well. My skin had melted away, and I had become the silence of the trees. I had stood for several moments in the hush, waiting, but for what I had not known.

Suddenly, I realized that because of this memory, and the dream of this memory, it was in me to be all that the old man was...I had only to realize that. I laughed until my eyes ran with tears. The tears trickled down my cheeks and splashed into the green, curling moss on which I sat. The moss, the old man, and the garden faded from the room. I was alone once again in the deepening, dark silence of the classroom. I slowly stood up. I went home.

But in the days that followed, it seemed that now that I had learned how to listen differently to the children around me, their language play seemed to be everywhere. I heard children of all ages, saying what they needed and wanted, so clearly. Around them were adults, who for the most part, were unable to hear them, and who did not seem to be able to see that their nonsense often sprang from the discipline of their own listening to place and time and

becoming. It was like not seeing that through the gardener's listening, the carefully cultured Japanese garden had become a living repetition of the wild hills beyond.

II

Come forth,
and bring with you
a heart
that watches and receives.
(Wordsworth, 1778)

Chandre and I sat quietly together. Silence washed around us, lapping gently at the edges of my last few moments in this classroom. Suddenly the door opened, and the friend for whom I had been waiting walked in. Together we loaded my boxes of books and files onto his van, and as I walked past the glass case high on the wall for the last time, I looked up. The gardener seemed to bow his head toward me ever so slightly, as I passed. But I noticed that he was listening to Chandre.

# EPILOGUE

## I

Look Sariputra,
"Emptiness is form" indeed:
Those full-blooming flowers.
(Shigematsu, 1988, line 315)

In this dissertation, many voices have been blended with thoughts and imaginings, to create a fiction. All of the stories are mine, with the exception of the traditional tale included in the story of the gardener, the one about the old man who climbed to the top of the hill. Mari, is of course, me. The text is a re-creation from my own life, and from the lives of many children whom I have met over years of teaching and parenting. Into this is blended the voices of six other teachers who took part in a research seminar, and who related incidents from their past, either in group conversation or written journals. Details of my own stories and those of Sarah, Elizabeth, Jocelyn, Allan, Marion, and Skylar in the research seminar, are seamless. Where possible I used their words as they came to me. Where necessary I filled their mouths with words I imagine they could have said, keeping true to character as much as possible. While the words of the adult participants are fictionalized, the experiences of the children are as true as can be to what I remember my memories to be. The

gardener is who he is. A benign Shinto spirit such as this would not normally talk to a human being in the way I have described. But then, such a spirit would not normally be present in a classroom in a school in western Canada. Where he came from and whether he is still there or not, I cannot say. Some things will always be beyond explanation.

In this work, my intention was to explore possible connections between literacy and play by following up the playfulness I found in children when reading and writing made sense to them. It was my purpose to follow the sparkle in their eyes and the lilt of their voices, as beginning readers and writers. From the work that I have done, I perceive that this connection may be in the relationship between literature itself, and the social situation in which literature is shared and literacy is played. The sparkle in the eyes and the lilt in the voice seems to be related to the inarticulate in our search for self. An open space within. A nothing that is becoming. I believe that coming to know brings us to play, to poetry, and to analogy or metaphor, as we struggle to speak the unthought.

How have I dealt with a phenomenon that is itself an illusion? By creating another illusion, and trusting to the intuition of the reader to make meaning in the face of ambiguity. My work has taken on the character of an improvisational art, a literacy-of-literacy that, as Lyotard (1989) suggests, "Puts forward the unpresentable in

presentation itself..." (p. 81). This research attempts to point to relational energy as the potential of silence.

While literature could be described as a collective cultural voice, and play is often thought of as just something messy and noisy that children do, literacy has often been assumed to be an instrumental process that allows the functions of reading and writing to be performed. This dissertation exposes literacy as something more than an instrumental process, and the connections between playfulness and literature are revealed to be powerful, if indefinable.

Is it possible for a dissertation to be a piece of literature? Can literature be research? Thomas Pavel (1986) urges that literature confirms formal logic, and suggests that we do not need to look to formal logic to confirm literature, which is what we have done traditionally. As Tolstoy (1957) reflected, "The only knowledge I and all men possess that is firm, uncontestable, and clear is here, and it cannot be explained by reason - this knowledge is outside the sphere of reason: it has no causes and can have no effects" (p. 830). Reason alone cannot serve us completely. What of the body, and the heart, and our experience of dwelling in the world?

When judging this dissertation, please ask whether it has been true to itself, as a work of fiction must be. Was a world created? Has something appeared from nothing? From

these few wisps of memory, this gathering of dreams, and shreds of thoughts shaken together as words, did your heart begin to search through a dark moment of your own? Or did you laugh? Did you almost cry? Did you feel closer to yourself? Was there a passage that made you want to talk to me or to someone near you? Were you stirred to revisit a place of your own making, one that you thought you had forgotten? My intent was to create a space for listening to possibilities. Did it work for you?

My understanding of pedagogy and the child, my writing style, and my research conception is inspired by postmodernism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. Literature as a methodology is embodied reflexivity (Lawson, 1987). Meaning, I take to be unfixed, personal, and narrative in nature. Rigor, in my work, is achieved differently than in either quantitative methodologies, or qualitative traditions such as ethnography. It is intentionally evocative rather than explicit. It may arouse more questions than it answers. It may circle around, around again, and around the unsaid. It is this open space which emerges as the most appropriate contextualization for my writing on literacy learning, rather than a setting woven of the voices of those who are traditionally heard as 'experts' in the field.
I see literacy as continually emerging in all our lives as we attempt to articulate who we are, continually emerging through our play within the world, the world into which

Heidegger says we have been thrown (1977). Our literacy is our struggle with the transitory, the transcendant, the fleeting and the infinite, an illusion woven within a web of subtleties.

As Gregory Bateson (1979) says, our stories express the knotted relevancies of our lives. Literature and research are a knotted web of the personal and poetic, the drift and flow of being. As an image of knotted spume, this dissertation is radical in terms of research. It is the rippling of laughter (Caputo, 1987) in the face of the difficulty of life. And, as research, it is itself the work that it does (Barthes, 1986).

My work is hermeneutic in that I have looked and listened again and again to the voices of my perceptions and memories, as well as to transcripted texts of conversations and hand written journals of other teachers, in order to approach the epistemological and ontological inter-relatedness of literacy, play, literature, and social relations. It is, as Madison (1990) suggests, "idealized interpretation", and "creative language gaming" (p. 45). Within the reflexivity of the said, the experienced, and the "meant" I have sensed an inherent complementarity of literacy and play, knowing and being, and I have moved toward the generation of theory. My work is phenomenological in nature in that it attempts to evoke a moment of human experience by using example after example to

make visible an essence (van Manen, 1990, p. 121). After having read this dissertation, the reader will likely have gained a clear sense of my thesis. But if someone were to ask what this work is about, the reader is likely to find him or herself momentarily inarticulate. Silent. Searching for the words from the inside.

This work could be seen as smoothing out the corners of a world that has emphasized linear deduction and mechanical logic, a world in which both literacy, literature, and the human being, have generally been perceived as an object. This is why I have invoked the voices of Sir Philip Sydney, Wm. Wordsworth, Henry W. Longfellow, the Japanese gardener, Heidegger, Goethe, Goudge, and the Zen poets. Listening to these poets is an attempt to recall that throughout the years, even in the face of pervasive instrumentalism and traditional objectivism, there have been those who have pointed toward the round, the all.

II

Be round,
thoroughly round,
human mind!
Square minds
often scratch.
(Shigematsu, 1988, line 603)

You may try to be round,
but keep one corner,
O mind
otherwise you'll
slip and roll away.
(Shigematsu, 1988, line 605)

My work is postmodern in its sense of the nature of knowledge, and in my acceptance of thought and feeling and being as one reality. I believe that knowledge has a mythopoietic as well as rational nature (Tressler, 1988), that literacy is as much a matter of being as it is of knowing. My point of view recognizes the fundamental unity of the knower with the known (Baynes, K., Bohman, J., & McCarthy, T., 1987). What qualifies as knowledge is defined within the community that legitimates it. Rorty (1979) concludes that this legitimation is a social construct, and Lyotard (1989) asserts that the discourse within which this is accomplished is also that of the community in which it was generated. Thus all theories of meaning and truth are self-referential, as well as being socially constructed and maintained (Bruffee, 1986).

Each language community has its own "specialized logics

for dealing with questions of truth, justice, or taste" within a "rarefied expert culture" (Bruffee, 1986, p. 293). As the formalized outcome of research, "knowledge", as well as "the obvious", is defined relative to the expectations of a particular community of knowers.

Empirical science assumes that knowledge exists outside the knower, and is considered to be of the highest quality when untainted by the researcher. In this case the effect of the presence of the researcher is usually addressed through the use of rules that are intended to systematically reduce "subjectivity." Reduction of subjectivity is assumed to have the effect of increasing "objectivity" with the intention that the "evidence" that remains will be valid, reliable and generalizable. Perceptions thus will be reduced to discrete "pieces" of knowledge that can be "transferred" from the researcher to the consumer, that is, whoever it is that will "use" or apply the knowledge that has been produced (Lyotard, 1989). This view of knowledge is governed by language that is taken as "a system of symbols that are composed into patterns that stand for things in the world", ideally in one-to-one correspondence (Wynograd & Flores, 1986, p. 17). Reddy (1979) elaborates that in this use of language, knowledge becomes a disembodied thing while language is a tool, or "conduit" that "lets human ideas slip out of human brains so that once you have recording technologies, you do not need humans any

more" (p. 310).

Such analytic traditions based on the separation of the knower from the known have gone deeply into our general language and cultural consciousness. These traditions are especially obvious in research studies where discrete, finite truths are taken as the end purpose of research, and it is assumed that truth is to be approached through mind that is separated as much as possible from body. Even though many recent studies into play and literacy have been done that ostensibly do not "belong" in the empirical paradigm, nevertheless these traditions tend to be pervasive. The hegemony of rationalist, instrumentalist thinking is readily apparent in the vocabulary used in much of the research into play and literacy.

In perusing research regarding play and literacy I find myself reading "through" the language for underlying assumptions that the researcher has made regarding the nature of reality, knowledge, and being.

When I read such research, I ask, is reality here taken as being something that exists outside of the researcher's own perceptions? Also, I search for clues as to whether the writer assumes knowledge to be personal and solitary, or personal but socially constructed and always subject to the ambiguities of human communication, or whether "it" is something first to determine and then to transmit cleanly from one mind to another. These clues may be found in the

language, of the text/context.

The Platonic separation of knowing and being and the Cartesian expectations of objectivity, subjectivity, and the legitimation of knowledge by means of reduction, separation, fragmentation, and dichotomization are (Capra, 1982) metanarrative elements that I chose to not see as problematic for my particular work. But Lyotard (1989) offers the perspective that we now understand that "all formal systems have internal limitations" (p. 43). As a result, in philosophy as well as in science, analytic traditions have acknowledged that "it is impossible to step outside our skins - the linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism - and compare ourselves with something [external and] absolute" (Rorty, in Baynes et al., 1987, P. 33). Weaver (1985) points out that a similar shift in educational discourse has occurred since the 1970's. She notes that language study has altered its former emphasis on linguistic structure to a poststructuralist focus on function, or meaning-in-use.

Like language, knowledge is, I believe, an individual but not solitary creation, although each of us experiences it somewhat uniquely. Vygotsky (1976) shows us that because we are situated in a social world of other minds, the reality that we individually bring forth is not solipsistic. I believe that, at least for my own work, there is a need for wholeness at the heart.

I hope that a postmodern view may open space for both doing and reading research, and also for teaching, insofar as this basic change in the criteria of competence for legitimate knowledge requires an understanding that ontology and epistemology cannot be separated. It seems to me that a postmodern view of literacy would affirm that knowledge is a form of self-regulation within a system that is fundamentally open (Doll, 1986), profoundly social, and always shifting according to context. I believe that a postmodern view of literacy would also accept the view of the language theorists Brice-Heath (1986), Chukovskii (1963), and Lindfors (1987) that every child creates language anew, both in its structure and its function.

## III

The wind
brings me enough fallen leaves
to make a fire.
(Shigematsu, 1988, line 355)

As Bruner (1986) says, we negotiate our world moment by moment. This negotiation expresses our biological potential for perception and experience (Von Foerester, 1981; Maturana & Varela, 1988). And always something more than this. Something more that is a common ground between poets, and playing children, and perhaps, teachers.

Our patterning of perception and experience is in

relation to the perpetual flux where we find ourselves, where ambiguity is never suspended for more than a pause in time. We find ourselves in relation to perceptual flux, the patterning of our perception and experience. In such pauses, a perceptual event may be transmuted into a connection, a memory may be stirred, and we laugh, or we smile, or we cry, we speak, we 'read', or we 'write.' Our body may 'feel good'; excitement may rise within us. In this compelling transformation of body, mind, and heart, no experience is final.

What we do, who we feel we are, what we say, and how we understand each moment, is always subject to the ebb and flow of the human condition. Each moment is an unfolding pattern of constituitive flux within which we drift, moment by moment, in that ripple of silence. This is our socially experienced creation of a world.

While every moment seems new, what we hear is a repetition of ourselves in the world, but always a repetition with change (Bateson, 1979). This is the music of pattern. This is the Bach fugue written in blood, bone, and breath. To recognize the music in ourselves is to take the first steps toward knowing how to awaken others to their own rhythms and songs. If we hear the music in our own lives, we can hear the music in the lives of our students.

> By its original meaning
> poetry means simply creation,
> and creation, as you know,
> can take various forms.
>
> Any action
> which is the cause
> of a thing emerging
> from non-existence [silence?]
> might be called poetry,
> and all the processes
> in all the crafts
> are kinds of poetry,
> and all those engaged in them
> poets.
> (Plato, 1951 Trans., p. 85)

Thus, regarding literacy and young children, are poets players, and players poets? Heidegger (1971) asked a related question. He perceived language as being so burdened with the certainty of knowledge as finite and external to the knower that he insisted that it was no longer able to express being, or ideas that were close to themselves. Seeing language as "a forgotten and therefore used up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer", he wondered whether language had come to an end (p. 208). This is because the more we use ourselves in language the more we cannot bring ourselves to being. While Heidegger may have insight on the level of language as a social phenomenon, as a teacher it seems to me that I may also especially profit from his point of view as I seek literacy for myself, and wish to support others. I would accept Heidegger's discomfort with a language that is weighted with such historical sediment.

While recognizing that there is no ultimate or unitary body of knowledge, each child may be viewed as bringing forth a world (Maturana & Varela, 1988) through the sociocultural use of language. This world is indeed new. Being, thus languaged is an effort within the always already (Heidegger, 1977). It is a re-iteration of what already is, and yet the result is never completely self-similar. Thus, while beyond the poem is silence, this silence is not empty but is a generative space, which sustains the energy from which we may "become." Heidegger (1971a) suggests that "all our heart's courage is the echoing response to the first call of being which gathers our thinking into the play of the world..." (p. 9). He calls to us to come back from continued separation from ourselves. While we may not be able to sustain this "coming back" indefinitely, perhaps the idea of the idea of doing so provides for an essential openness.

V

Clear and distinct,
but not loud,
in the dripping din of twilight,
Still for a moment he stood,
and listened.
(Longfellow, 1858)

Is print magical to young children, as Sarah had mentioned in the conference conversation? Is literature itself capable of magic? I know that sometimes reading aloud to children has a mystical quality, and an ordinary story time will become something more than just story time. There were times when, as I read, all the children would sit very, very still, and would seem to be concentrating deeply. It was as though we would enter a silence together, a stillness created by the resonance of the sound of my voice, the rhythm of the words of the story, and the children's listening.

Although I could sense this fecund silence when it was happening, I could never predict when we would hear it. I could plan for it to happen only insofar as I could plan to read aloud each day.

That same mystical quality was sometimes to be found in the classroom when the children were engaged in group play. An idea and their acting out of it would carry such an energy that through their own intense concentration, and their own letting go of the present, they were drawn into that same resonant stillness. A place between worlds...?

Points of liquid silver shimmering in the river? Candles shining under water? Surely a place beyond the mental and physical worlds in which we normally relate to each other.

It is as though the fictive world of the social text of the play, or the affective space of the story becomes a pool of still water. This still, narcissian pool is the animate relationship of being with becoming, and the reflective confrontation of self within self within other.

It seems to me that a child must go with another, over and over, into the worlds of story and print. They must go with another over and over, hearing from the presence of the other, the echoes of literacy place. They learn to feel safe there because we feel safe, and in sharing that space, we show them how it is done. It is as though, as Kathy said, the print itself is magical, and opaque, without light. This is deep water, made animate by the social and cultural voices that flow within. It is the child alone who can determine when she is ready to enter that world. It is the child who must choose the place to go into the dark underwater world of text. The child will know how to choose this place to go inside, and she will know this only through having been there with the voice of another, over and over and over. She will take a book she knows well and go somewhere private, under a table or under a bed, or under the covers in her room. Familiar with the place, and alone, she must wander off to explore, her way illuminated by all

the river water and candlelight that can be held in one small hand.

But it often happens that an explorer will go a little too far, and if she drops her candle, the light will go out. The child faces a death there, alone, and in the dark, and she must go deeper into her will to become whole. I think a teacher is someone who can sense when a child is lost in the dark. A teacher is someone who knows how to help a lost child to find the safe place inside themselves again. A teacher is someone who will take the child again and again, with laughter, and silliness, and reverence as well, into the world of print, in safety, until once more the child is ready to confront/be confronted by their knowing/unknowing.

Eventually the child may find herself dancing in the circle of magic, the magic Sarah spoke of, the magic of letters and sounds and meanings, the stable and the transmuted. In this circle of candlelight, in the light shed by her own soul, she will be inside as well as outside herself, and able to connect back to the world of other print makers and print users. And if she should drop the candle again, she will know how to find, and light it.

When she finds that she can indeed look after herself and does not need to shiver alone in the dark, she is reborn into a relationship with other beings, other minds, not as a child any longer, but as one who can nurture both herself and others. This is learning to read and write.

We are born once as physical beings. We are continually recreated again as relational beings as we look into the eyes of our mothers, our fathers, our teachers. And the pool of clear, still water that is a story, or a piece of literature. As we express ourselves through symbol, we are no longer alone, but part of human kind, and this we must have if we are to live whole. As we learn to communicate our selves through our first cries and baby words, as we learn to play, we discover that what is, is not, and that through play what is, is not about itself, but something more.

Do we not need to be allowed to struggle in this ambiguity, this paradox? Is it not imperative that we face death in order to embrace life? Isn't it only after a confrontation with the dark, that we recognize that we may dance and sing? The adults in a child's life mediate the social, the physical, emotional, and the intellectual environment. The messages a child reads are partly from the adult mediator, partly from the physical source, and partly from their own perceptions. Before we can become readers and writers, we must face our inability to use the system as others do. This is facing death. This is facing our separation from others of our kind. We must confront our inability, and we must admit our own need for light and breath, and for the literacy connection with others, the hand of our mothers, and the voice of our fathers. The

generations are connected at the point of recognition of the relations between, and the need of one for the other. It is the eyes and the hand and the being of the other that brings us to know that we are strong enough to do what must be done. The child's right to struggle must never be denied, for this right is the need to know herself. She can only do this through the process of finding her own way. Children must find their own way, but they may not do it alone. Another human being must mediate the journey, share the perceptions, be there alongside, and show the way through being there, through laughter in the eyes and warmth in the voice.

Literacy is more than a set of skills to be learned. Literacy is life. Literacy is the processes and the nature of the relational self. Do we not bring children to the love of literature, to the love of themselves, and don't we also help them to find the ability to love others, all at the same time that we read aloud to them?

When children sit near me and I read aloud to them, there are times when the moment, the relational experience, of being/Being together with literature takes us to silence. In the silence we come to a heightened awareness of self, others, and the possibility of awareness in and of others. Perhaps we will not suffer the fate of Narcissus. He, like so many of us, gazed into the still, forest pool, unaware of Echo's insistence that we image ourselves as self within

self, touching other. The reading circle itself is Echo's call to touch, at the juncture of the paradox of this dissertation, where the sensibility and sensuality of literacy/literature meets resonance with resonance, and worlds of harmony are born.

Echo is the relationship, the child in the lap, Phil in my arms, and the reading circle. Echo is Jonathan rolling across the room to the sound of my voice. Echo is Samantha's laughter and the tears of happiness on her face as she learns to read. In the resonance within ourselves and in our awareness of others, we are brought to the round mind. That is to remember that the individual is always in relation to others, and in this sense always empty, always a silent space. We listen to the silence of the words, the resonance of word and world with self, and we desire to be more than we are. Is it not out of this listening that images form, and we become something more?

VI

There breathes
a living fragrance
from the shore of flowers
yet fresh with childhood.
(Byron, 1812, part 7, line 810)

I went to visit a cousin's family one day. When I arrived, my cousin was still away from home, so I made myself a pot of tea and sat down at the kitchen table to wait for her. The house seemed to be full of teenagers, and very loud music was blasting in the family room downstairs. I was beginning to wonder if I had come to the right place for a relaxing weekend. There was a paperback book lying on the table. I picked it up, and found that it was a collection of short stories by Stephen King. From the name written inside the front cover, I could tell that it belonged to my fourteen year old niece. I started to thumb through the book and as I did, two girls emerged from the basement and sat down across from me. Their eyes turned to the book in my hand. Moments later, I found myself reading aloud to these two, who soon became four, and then six young people. They came and settled down around me, and together we revelled in the horror of a story about a lawn mower that attacked and devoured its owner. There I was, reading aloud to a roomful of teenagers, something I had done so often with little children, and although no moment of sacred stillness emerged, it was fun. And it was a relief to have

most of the young people in the house where I could see them, and know what they were doing. Later, in the bathroom, I noticed a copy of Dr. Seus' 'Green Eggs and Ham' lying on the counter in the bathroom. I noticed my sixteen year old nephew Will's name had been carefully printed upside down on the front cover. The lettering was neat and childish. The letters wandered obliquely across the surface, using the whole width of the book. Obviously Will had printed this many years ago. I wondered why, in this household of two adults, and two teenagers, is there a copy of 'Green Eggs and Ham' in the bathroom. Was this an artifact, I wondered? A joke...? Both?

Let me describe Will. He is sixteen. He is cool. He wears a black leather jacket, a Raiders baseball cap, and a silver cross in his left ear. He pumps iron. The passion of his life is his dirt bike. He figures on being a mechanic, and does very well in school, with a grade 10 average of over 80%. He and his friends wear tee shirts bearing words that I find a little surprising. A steady flow of boy and girl friends streams into and out of this house to the beat of 'Metallica', 'Guns n'Roses', and 'Exodus'.

None of these details explains the presence of Dr. Seus in the bathroom. Will is not a child any more. That little boy who wrote his name on the cover of 'Green Eggs and Ham' is long gone.

Or is he? Later, as I became part of the rhythm of this household, I went downstairs to sort out some laundry. Will was sitting in his bedroom with his friend Peter. Peter has been Will's best friend since they were young children. Peter's high school average is in the high 90's. He is not cool, not like Will. No matter what he wears, he manages to look like an overgrown eleven year old. His skin and eyes glow with fun and good health. The boys were sitting together under posters announcing their awakening interest in the female body and also named their favourite bands. This is the conversation I overheard:

Peter: I am Sam. Sam I am.

Will: I am Sam.

Peter: Sam I am.

Will: Sam I am.

Peter: No, you're supposed to say, "That Sam I am."

Peter noticed, but ignored me.

Will: That Sam I am. I do not like that Sam I am...

I saw that the boys didn't have the book there with them. Were they in a garden of the mind, re-visiting a familiar place through memory? I turned around and went back upstairs, not wanting to disturb them. The laundry could wait. What were the boys doing? Playing? Perhaps. Literate? Perhaps. Becoming? Certainly. Was this like my grandmother's kitchen dance, like the love of literature that she had had, and shared with me through the lilt of her

voice and the sparkle in her eyes? And her touch? Do the stories of our lives become the story of our lives? Through the rhythms and patterns of perception that perpetually play within, for these boys, was 'Green Eggs and Ham' a rippling of the infinite tension of an illusory but ever transmutable sense of being?

What does it mean for children to share literature with others? It seems that children who have been read to know archetypical, as well as social and superficial patterns. It is as though they absorb, as well as become part of the literature they hear, and so become part of the collected human knowledge, the cultural wisdom, the being and vision of their people. Literacy experiences that allow the exploration and articulation of this knowledge stir children deeply, as acting, thinking, feeling, and spiritual beings.

Is our awareness of these patterns our potential? We carry them inside us, and we articulate them, discover them, explore them, as we engage in life. We carry on living in this process of repetition, but it is always repetition with an element of change. Each child who tells or hears the Cinderella myth brings a unique past to that telling or hearing. Each child who hears of the wicked stepmother images a wickedness that bears both universal and individual traits. A change in the rhythm of the words announces a change in the purpose. Limericks are to amuse, as are most rhymes. Fairy tales, and the different styles of folk tales

both entertain us and gives us insight into the desires and actions of others. As they alert us of the purposes of others, they make us aware of ourselves. A newspaper article is written to another tempo, as is a Shakespearean tragedy. Would it make sense, would it be pattern, that the classroom that allows for the natural aural, oral, and visual search and response to pattern, would also allow for repetition with change. Is it not here that the child may be energized within the relational voice, and the 'I' may blossom as the agent of both change and intent, knowledge and being.

VII

The whole difference
between construction and creation
is exactly this:
that a thing constructed
can only be loved
after it is constructed;
that a thing created
is loved before it exists.
(Chesterton, 1836, preface)

The moon is set;
My shadow
has become myself.
(Shigematsu, 1988, line 382)

How might the stories recalled in this dissertation provide a view of the origins of literacy? What could the mountain, the river, and the image of the borrowed garden reveal concerning innate processes of human learning, and

the natural desire of the human mind to both bring order to experience, and to continually create the "new"? Why are these questions important to revealing a potential pedagogy for literacy?

As a teacher, my reading and re-reading of the world brings me to the realization that while I can invite a child to share my literacy world, I can neither transmit nor impose my knowledge. I may facilitate the exploration of another learner, but I cannot explicitly control the journey taken. My point of view suggests that epistemological questions must be engaged within the child's ontological adventures.

More than likely, we can all remember incidents in our past which influenced not only how we felt about reading and writing, but how we felt about ourselves as readers and writers. I feel that if educators can become consciously aware of events that were major influences in the development of their personal literacy, this understanding can explicitly inform their teaching practise. The ability to articulate the richness and depth of their personal literacy knowledge enhances educators' understanding of how to provide appropriate literacy spaces for young children, I believe, through heightened pedagogical thoughtfulness.

When do teachers begin to begin to ask questions about the nature of learning, literacy, knowledge, and most importantly, the child? Perhaps some never do. Recently I

was working with a young woman who was about to graduate with a Bachelor of Education degree. I observed her in a classroom as a student teacher. She was working with Matthew, a child much like Brad, the boy described in Part IV. I watched as she asked this child to fill in the blanks on a worksheet. He was a beginning reader who knew how to print the alphabet, but could print very few words. He was minimally attending to the task. After he had gone, I suggested to this young woman that perhaps the child needed her to be in his world with him, that they needed to share the same space. I suggested that she didn't need a worksheet for this, and that each day she and the child could focus on a few frequently used words, and practise these until they became familiar words to the boy. I suggested that they share the same piece of paper, and that she write the words first and then pass the pencil to him. I mentioned that she and Matthew could make up little jingles to help him to remember the words, and to enjoy the process. Simple ideas. Just something to start with. What was her answer? "Is the film strip still in the projector?" She hadn't heard me at all, just as she seemed to have not heard Matthew. Perhaps she thought the worksheet was just as effective and just as meaningful. Perhaps she thought it wouldn't make any difference.

What would happen if, in classrooms, we could

sensitively support, gently accept, and perhaps even inobtrusively join in with children's continued language play, or at least not interfere in a negative way, as they go on toward literacy? Perhaps children, with such pedagogues, could find how words, sounds and symbols fit together, and come gradually to a finely tuned awareness of and facility with both the oral and written language systems. In the shifting contexts that their play could bring them to, could they not continually unfold possibilities, possibilities that others could support if they were aware of their presence?

We are always reading and re-reading the spaces in which we find ourselves, and as we attune to these spaces we are always writing and re-writing the stories of our lives. No connection within the always already (Heidegger, 1971, 1977) is ever complete, but instead is a continued thread in an unfolding pattern. As such, language is an image of this implicate order (Bohm & Peat, 1987).

The play of mind is a powerful thing. To hear is to act within the world in a special way. It is a play that allows us to infinitely change, and remould the familiar (Carse, 1986; Vygotsky, 1986). The power of literature as the patterned voice of the cultural, social, intellectual flow of life, is that it is our collective heartbeat. From the classic literature and folk songs of my grandmother, to the Dr. Seus my nephew and his friend still quietly enjoy,

the stories of our life become the story of our lives. What is life, what is becoming but an articulation, an expression, a struggle to bring forth our selves as our literacy in the play of that flow?

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